

二哈 和他的 白猫师尊

肉包不吃肉/著



二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

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Book II: Same Destination

Ch.98 Shizun, I'm Begging You, Please Pay Attention To Me

Sisheng Peak has a cliff with a funny name called "Aaaaah".

There were lots of stories in the sect as to how this name came about, the most common one being that people often fell off of it due to how steep it was, thus the name "Aaaaah".

But Mo Ran knew that wasn't it.

The cliff rose high into the clouds, a difficult climb even for apes, and it was extremely cold, its peak covered in snow year-round. This was where the dead of Sisheng Peak were kept while awaiting their funerals.

He had only ever come here once in his past life.

That time wasn't much different from right now; it was also after the rift of the Infinite Hells, the bloody battle that ended countless lives, Shi Mei amongst them. Refusing to accept the reality, he had knelt by Shi Mei's coffin for days on end, gazing at his face inside, looking almost as if he wasn't dead at all...

"It's called Aaaaah from back when your dad passed," was what Xue Zhengyong had told him as he kept him company in the cold of the Frostsky Hall in the past life.

"I only had the one brother. We founded Sisheng Peak together. But your dad... he was just like you, stubborn. He barely even got to enjoy the good life, or maybe he got sick of it, but one slip against the demons, and he was gone."

It was freezing inside Frostsky Hall. Xue Zhengyong took a swig from the sheepskin of wine he had brought before offering it to Mo Ran.

"You can have some, just don't tell your aunt."

Mo Ran didn't take it, didn't even move.

Xue Zhengyong sighed, "This cliff is called Aaaaah because I was so miserable in those days, it felt like my heart had been dug out. All I did was stay here with your dad and cry. I sound pretty awful when I cry, just howling like AAAAH, and that's where the name came from."

He glanced at Mo Ran and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Uncle isn't well-read or anything, but life is ephemeral like the morning dew, over in a blink. Just think of it as Mingjing having gone on a bit ahead of you; you can be brothers^[1] again in the next life."

Mo Ran's eyes slid slowly shut.

Xue Zhengyong continued, "Condolences and whatnot are just words. If you're sad, then just cry. If you don't want to leave, then stay and keep him company. But you have to eat, and drink your water. Go get a bite at Mengpo Hall first, then you can come back here and kneel as long as you want, I won't stop you."

The Frostsky Hall was frigid and silent, white silk drifting lightly within the grand hall, like gentle fingers brushing the brow.

Mo Ran opened his eyes slowly.

The coffin was the same as the one in his memory, cast from the black snow of Kunlun, lustrous and translucent, threads of cold streaming from the surface. Only, the one lying inside was now Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran never would have thought that the one to die in the Heavenly Rift of this lifetime would be Chu Wanning.

He was taken by surprise, he didn't know how to react.

Faced with this person's ice-cold body, he actually didn't feel much of anything, not joy from the death of his foe, nor grief from the passing of his Shizun.

Mo Ran stared at Chu Wanning through lowered lashes for a long time, almost doubtful. His face looked even colder than usual, truly covered in a layer of frost now, specks of ice clinging to the lashes of his closed eyes. His lips were a pale blue, and his skin was nearly transparent, the light blue of the veins visible like minute cracks on porcelain.

How could he have been the one to die?

Mo Ran lifted his hand to touch Chu Wanning's cheek; it felt cold.

His hand trailed down, to his throat, his neck; there was no pulse.

And then to his hand.

He gripped his hand; the joints were already starting to stiffen, and the skin there felt rough.

Mo Ran thought it strange—the tips of Chu Wanning's fingers were lightly calloused, but his palms had always been soft and delicate. He looked closer despite himself, only to see scores of lacerations, open cuts that, although cleaned, will never heal now.

He remembered Xue Meng's words.

"His spiritual energy was completely drained. He was no different from an ordinary person at that time, couldn't use any techniques at all, not even a communication spell. He could only carry you on his back and climb up the stairs of Sisheng Peak, step by step..."

And when he couldn't do it anymore, couldn't stand anymore, he crawled on the ground, on his knees, dragging him, until his fingers were torn, and his hands were covered in blood.

All to bring him home.

Mo Ran muttered hollowly, "Was it you who carried me back?"

"....."

"Chu Wanning, was it you..."

"....."

"I won't believe it unless you nod," Mo Ran said to the person in the coffin, his expression placid as if certain that the person before him would wake up. "Chu Wanning, give me a nod. Just one nod, and I'll believe you, and I won't hate you anymore... just one nod, okay?"

But Chu Wanning only continued to lie there, cold and expressionless, as if he didn't care the slightest bit whether Mo Ran hated him or not; he himself had left with a clear conscience, leaving others to survive with their guilt.

This person, whether alive or dead, was always more maddening than he was sympathetic.

Mo Ran suddenly sneered. "Then again," he said, "when have you ever listened to me."

Staring at Chu Wanning, he suddenly felt that it was all so absurd.

All these years, he hated Chu Wanning because he looked down on him, and the hatred deepened because he didn't save Shi Mei.

Turning and twisting, this hatred persisted for more than ten years, but one day, all of a sudden, he was told that——

"When Chu Wanning turned and left back then, it was to protect you."

He was suddenly told that——

"The Discernment Barrier is twinned. Whatever damage you took, he suffered the same."

His spiritual energy was spent, he couldn't even protect himself anymore, he...

Great, just perfect. Chu Wanning is right in everything he does. Then what about him?

Head in the dark like a know-nothing idiot, running around in circles like a god damn clown, hissing and snarling in his hatred for so long.

And for what?!!

A brief misunderstanding is like a smudge of dirt on a healing wound. As long as it's discovered in time, washed off, and the salve re-applied, everything will be fine.

But if the misunderstanding goes on for ten, twenty years, and the person trapped in the web puts in endless hatred, too many cares, countless restraints, and even his life.

These emotions will scab over and grow into new skin, forming part of the body.

And then, to suddenly be told that "That's not it, that's all wrong."

What to do then? The dirt from back then had already lodged under the skin with the passing of time, had already immersed into the blood.

The healed flesh would have to be torn open again to remove that bygone hatred.

A misunderstanding of one year is a misunderstanding.

A misunderstanding of ten years is an injustice.

A misunderstanding of a lifetime, from life to death, is fate.

Their fate was blighted.

The heavy gates of the Frostsky Hall opened slowly.

Just like in the previous lifetime, Xue Zhengyong, a sheepskin of wine in hand, walked heavily to Mo Ran's side and sat down on the floor next to him.

"I heard you were here. Uncle will keep you company."

Xue Zhengyong's fierce eyes were still red, clearly having cried not long ago.

"And him too."

Mo Ran said nothing. Xue Zhengyong twisted open the cap and took several big gulps before suddenly stilling, wiping roughly at his face and forcing a grin as

he said, "Yuheng never liked it when I drank, now... *sigh*, no, nevermind, nevermind. I'm not even that old, but I've already seen off so many friends. Ran-er, do you know what kind of feeling that is?"

"....."

Mo Ran lowered his lashes.

Xue Zhengyong had asked him the same question in the past life.

Back then, all he saw was Shi Mei's lifeless body, what did he care if others lived or died? He didn't understand, nor did he want to.

But how could he not understand now?

Before he had been reborn, he had stood alone in the empty halls of Wushan Palace.

One day, jolting awake from a light slumber in which he had dreamt of bygone days spent as Yuheng's disciple, he had the sudden impulse to go see his old room at the disciple quarters. The narrow room, unused for so long, was covered in dust when he opened the door and stepped inside.

He had found a small fragrance burner toppled on the floor, knocked over by someone, some time. He picked it up and reflexively went to put it back to its original place.

But the years had flowed by like a rapid stream; holding the burner, he suddenly froze.

"Where did I used to keep this burner?"

He couldn't remember.

His eagle-like gaze swept across the attendants at his back, but their faces were nothing but blurs, he couldn't even tell one from another.

But of course these people wouldn't know where in the room of his youth the emperor used to keep this fragrance burner.

"Where did I used to keep this burner?"

He couldn't remember, and anyone who could was already dead or gone. How could Mo Ran not understand how Xue Zhengyong felt right now.

"Every now and then I would remember some joke from my youth, out of the blue, and just blurt it out, but then realize that not a single person who gets it is even around anymore."

Xue Zhengyong took another swig of wine and, lowering his head, let out a mirthless laugh.

"Like your dad, or our friends from before... or your Shizun..."

Fragments of light reflecting off the wetness in his eyes, he asked, "Ran-er, do you know why this cliff is called Aaaaah?"

Mo Ran knew what he wanted to say, but he was too distraught right now to want to listen to Xue Zhengyong talk about his dead father, so he responded, "I know. It's because Uncle used to cry here."

"Ah..." Xue Zhengyong paused and blinked slowly, wrinkles deep at the corners of his eyes. "Did your aunt already tell you?"

"Mn."

Xue Zhengyong wiped away his tears and inhaled deeply. "Alright, okay, then you already know what Uncle wanted to tell you. Go ahead and let it out if you're sad, it's alright. There's no shame in crying for someone."

But Mo Ran didn't cry, maybe because his heart had already become hard as iron from two lifetimes of this. Compared to how devastated he had been

back then when Shi Mei died, the current him was so very calm. So calm that he was unsettled by his own numbness, unaware that he was actually this heartless.

Xue Zhengyong finished drinking and stayed a while longer before getting up, his movements a little unsteady; maybe his legs had gone numb from kneeling for so long, or maybe he had drank too much.

His broad hand clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. "The Heavenly Rift's been closed, but we still don't know who's behind it all. Maybe that was the end of it, but there might also be another big battle coming up. Ran-er, make sure you go down and eat something, don't wreck your body."

Having said that, he turned and left.

It was night time, and outside Frostskey Hall, a waning crescent hung high in the skies above. Treading through the snow that covered the cliff year-round with half a skin of wine in hand, Xue Zhengyong's voice, deep and rough like a broken gong, rang out in a short tune from Shuzong.

"Greeting old friends but half are gone, meeting only in cups of wine. Beneath the osmanthus tree hides a pot of wine, a drink shared between aged faces and streaks of white. The first light of dawn shatters the dream and all depart, leaving me alone with my old tears. I'd give what remains of my life to the God of Dreams, if only to call you back cup after cup."

It was different from the past life after all; the one who died wasn't Shi Mei, but Chu Wanning, and so Xue Zhengyong was struck by even deeper sorrows.

With his back facing the open gates of Frostskey Hall, Mo Ran listened to the lingering sound of that hoarse voice, resounding yet mournful. Slowly, the voice grew distant like a soaring eagle, until it was swallowed by the wind and snow.

The world thus blanketed by a layer of bright white, the moon high in the vast, boundless sky washing over everything until it was all so faint and insubstantial, leaving only one line to echo over and over.

"Leaving me alone with my old tears...leaving me alone with my old tears..."

Mo Ran wasn't sure how long had passed when he eventually left Frostskey Hall to walk slowly down the mountain.

Uncle was right, the Heavenly Rift may have been closed, but things might not be over yet. Chu Wanning isn't here anymore; if there is to be another battle, he'll have to fend for himself.

It was already late by the time he got to Mengpo Hall, and there was no one else around aside from the old woman making the late-night supper.

Mo Ran asked for a small bowl of noodles and found a corner spot to slowly eat. The noodles were hot and numbing, warm in his stomach. The dimly-lit Mengpo Hall was hazy when he looked up between large ravenous bites through the thick screen of steam.

He vaguely recalled how stubborn he had been in the past life after Shi Mei's death, how he had refused to leave or eat for three days straight.

And how, later, when he had finally been talked into leaving Frostskey Hall to go eat something, he had happened across Chu Wanning in the kitchen, his back facing him as he clumsily rolled wrappers and mixed fillings, and how there had been flour and water on the table, and a couple rows of wontons, neatly lined.

"Clang."

The loud sound of everything being swept off that table rang out from the bygone past, stilling the chopsticks in the hands of the present Mo Ran, making it hard for him to swallow.

At the time, he had thought that Chu Wanning was taunting him, that he purposely wanted to hurt him.

But, thinking about it now, maybe Chu Wanning really did only want to make him a bowl of wontons in place of the departed Shi Mei.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? Do you have any right to use the things he used? To make the food he did? Shi Mei is *dead*, are you happy now? Or do you have to hound all your disciples to death or madness before you’re satisfied? Chu Wanning! There is no one left in this world who could make those wontons ever again, no matter how much you imitate him, you’ll never even come close!”

Each word a stab to the heart.

He went back to eating his noodles, not wanting to think about it anymore. But it wasn’t that easy; his memories wouldn’t leave him be.

He remembered Chu Wanning’s face with such clarity, clearer than ever before; his face had betrayed nothing, not joy and not sorrow. He remembered every detail of that moment with such unprecedented clarity.

He remembered the faint trembling at the tips of those fingers, the smudge of flour on the side of that cheek.

He remembered the plump, snowy wontons all over the floor.

He remembered how Chu Wanning had lowered his lashes and then bent down to slowly pick them up from the floor, those wontons that could no longer be eaten, and then thrown them away himself.

Thrown them away himself.

There was still more than half the bowl of noodles with peas left.

But Mo Ran couldn’t eat another bite. Pushing the bowl away, he fled this place that was going to drive him insane. He ran madly through Sisheng Peak, as if trying to outrun this decade-long misunderstanding, as if trying to get back those ridiculous years, as if trying to catch up to that person who had left Mengpo Hall all alone that day.

Catch up to him so that he could say.

“I’m sorry, I was wrong to hate you.”

In the darkness of night, Mo Ran ran aimlessly, he ran and ran... but he saw fragments of Chu Wanning’s shadow everywhere he went: The Platform of Sin and Virtue, where he had taught him to read and trained him in the sword; Naihe Bridge, where he had shared an umbrella with him as they walked together; Clearsky Hall, where he had endured punishment by striking, and left all alone.

He felt more and more distraught, more and more helpless.

Suddenly, he ran into an open clearing, and it abruptly felt like the haze had dissipated and he could see the bright moon high above again.

Breathing heavily, he stopped running.

The Heaven-Piercing Tower...

The place where he had died in the past life. The place where he had met Chu Wanning for the first time.

Mayhem in his eyes like a battlefield in chaos, heartbeats wild like the beating of war drums, unable to ward off the tidal surge of the past and helpless to avoid its relentless assault, he had been forced here in the end.

Where the moonlight was a pale white, and the breeze a gentle caress. Where they had first met.

Mo Ran finally stopped running; he knew he couldn't escape it, the fact that, in this life, he was bound to owe Chu Wanning.

Slowly, he walked up the steps, walked toward that magnificent haitang tree. He reached out and touched the bark of the trunk, dry and hard like a calloused heart.

It had already been nearly three days since Chu Wanning's death.

Mo Ran looked up; the flowering tree was gentle as it always had been. Only then did a bout of boundless sorrow suddenly well up in his chest, and, pressing his forehead against the trunk of the tree, he finally started crying, tears falling like rain.

"Shizun, Shizun..." He murmured between choked sobs, repeating, over and over, his words from when he first met Chu Wanning. "Won't you pay attention to me... pay attention to me..."

But though things remained the same, the people had changed, and in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower now there was only him. No one paid attention to him, no one would come again.

The reborn Mo Ran had the body of a youth, but inside was the soul of the thirty-two year old Taxian-jun. He had seen far too much life and death, tasted all the joys and sorrows that the world had to offer, and so, in this reborn life, he never really showed much genuine emotion, always muted as if hidden behind a mask.

But right now, the loss and anguish written on his face was so raw, so vulnerable, so genuine, so naive.

Only now was he truly like an ordinary youth who had lost his Shizun, like a child who had been abandoned, like a stray dog that had lost its home and could never again find its way back.

He said, pay attention to me.

Pay attention to me...^[2]

But, in the end, his only answer was the rustling of the leaves and the dancing shadows of the flowers.

The person with the striking features under the haitang tree that year would never again, *could* never again lift his head and look at him—not even just one last glance.

Author's Notes:

Big white cat's talking corpse: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Pup: "QAQ"

Pup.exe is still glitching, big white cat shoots him a glance, sighs, and takes the script from his hands.

Big white cat reading pup's lines for him: [the rest of the thanks]

Ch.99 Shizun's Third Weapon

That night, Mo Ran slept leaning against the haitang tree.

There were many places at Sisheng Peak that had traces of Chu Wanning having lived there; if he wanted to pay his respects, there was no place more suitable than Red Lotus Pavilion. But only leaning against this tree dulled the

ache in his heart, only here could he feel a faint connection to the world of the living.

He had once thought that taking Chu Wanning as his master was the greatest misfortune of his life, that it was a mistake from the very start.

Only now did he finally realize that the unfortunate one wasn't him, wasn't Mo Weiye, but the one standing beneath the flowers that day, head lowered and lost in thought. The unfortunate one was Chu Wanning.

"Xianjun xianjun, pay attention to me."

Vaguely, he seemed to recall that being the first thing he had said to Shizun. Maybe not those exact words—it had been too long ago, and he no longer remembered too clearly.

But he could still clearly remember the look on Chu Wanning's face when those eyelashes flickered up, bewildered and startled.

And how gentle he had looked.

Lying beneath the flowering tree, Mo Ran thought that, if time could flow backwards to the day he chose his master, that he absolutely, no matter what, shouldn't cling to Chu Wanning to accept him as a disciple again.

Because the price for the flicker of those eyelashes in that instant was the endless entanglement to follow, was Chu Wanning's very life.

Two lifetimes.

He had been ruined in his hands.

For two lifetimes...

His throat moved in a swallow as he closed his eyes against the rising threat of a sob. A long, long time passed in an agony that felt like a million ants gnawing at his heart before he finally drifted off into a light slumber.

And then, in his dreamscape, that segment of memory that he hadn't dared touch since his rebirth struggled free of its chains, raised its knife, and carved out his heart.

The him of that time had stood at the very top of the human realm, and Chu Wanning, spiritual core abolished, was imprisoned in his palace.

But he had been targeted by several assassination attempts in a row, the last of which had been perpetrated by Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue. Mo Ran was too powerful to yield to them his life, but he did sustain grave injuries from it and had to stay in his palace and recover for more than a month before he got his strength back.

Shuzhong was a rainy place; even more so during those days, pitter-pattering without stop.

Fingers pale as jade clutching the edge of the heavy brocade cloak draped over his shoulders, Mo Ran stood beneath the stoa, gazing at the grey skies above, the expression on his face one caught between mirth and madness. He didn't speak, but anyone could feel the twisted nature radiating from his person; he had been born with such a handsome face, but the light in his eyes was dark and ruthless, devoid of any warmth.

And the longer he sat on that throne, the darker it became.

Footsteps sounded from behind him. Without looking back, he said, "You're here?"

"Are you going to lay waste to Kunlun Taxue Palace?" Chu Wanning's voice rang out faintly in the grand hall.

Mo Ran replied, "And what if I am?"

“...Have you forgotten what you promised me? That you wouldn’t go after Xue Meng’s life anymore.”

Mo Ran’s voice was calm and even as he spoke, “Shizun came all this way and didn’t even stop to ask how my injuries are doing, or whether I’m cold standing out here in the wind; all he cares about is who I’m going to kill.”

“Mo Weiyu, I came to tell you to stop doing things that you’ll end up regretting.”

“Heh, regret? Shouldn’t you be the one regretting? Your core is already shattered from our fight back when you tried to stop me from razing Rufeng Sect; you’re just an ordinary person now, without the strength to oppose me now that I’m going to raze Taxue Palace. Don’t you regret not minding your own business back then?”

Mo Ran turned to look over his shoulder at him, a flicker in his eyes and a cruel smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Chu Wanning, you worthless cripple, what exactly do you hope to stop me with?”

Chu Wanning couldn’t find any words for a long while, maybe because he really did have nothing left.

A loud clap of thunder suddenly split the skies and rain poured forth, streaming down the roof and spilling from the eaves.

Finally, Chu Wanning closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, all that he said was a quiet, “Don’t go.”

Mo Ran turned around with a flutter of black robes.

Framed by the ashen skies behind him and torrential rain amidst freezing winds, he looked at Chu Wanning within the hall. “And why shouldn’t I go? I’ve already given Xue Meng his chance. That year, when you willingly gave yourself to me for his sake, I kept my word and spared his life in exchange for you—— But now *he’s* the one after *my* life, so, tell me, why shouldn’t I go?”

“.....”

“Well? Nothing to say?” Mo Ran scoffed. “Go on, berate me, curse me out, say something. Chu Wanning, where did all that might of yours go? I already know Xue Meng’s your favorite, your best disciple, you think he’s earnest and sincere, and I’m just the mud on the bottom of his boot.”

“That’s enough.” Chu Wanning’s brows were knitted tight on his pale face, as if trying to hold something back.

“That is *not* enough! How could it be?” The sight filled Mo Ran’s heart with a savage glee, anger, ecstasy, hatred, and jealousy scorching his heart with their intensity.

His eyes glinted as he paced back and forth.

“There’s no second chance, Chu Wanning, there’s no second chance for him. I’m going to kill him, and I’m going to skin him for a rug, drink wine from his skull! I’ll scoop out his insides, chop him up, and stew him! You can’t stop me! ——Chu Wanning, you can’t stop me!”

Eyes reddened, he grew more enraptured the more he raved, frenzied and crazed.

When suddenly a hand fisted the collar of his robes and another landed on his face.

“Snap out of it!”

Chu Wanning’s face was so close he could see the quiver of his eyelashes and the wetness in his eyes.

“Mo Ran...wake up already, wake up...”

"I *am* awake!" The burn of his cheek only drove him further into madness. Glaring at Chu Wanning's face, he felt a sudden flare of anger. "I'm perfectly fucking awake! You're the one that's asleep! Are you blind?!"

He shoved him off and ripped open the collar of his robes to reveal bloodstained bandages.

"Are you blind, Chu Wanning!" He roared, jabbing at his own chest, and when even that didn't feel like enough, ripped the gauze right off to show the bloody mess beneath...

"Who do you think did this? Your good disciple! Xue Meng! If he had aimed his Longcheng just a bit more to the side, I'd be dead right now! So tell me why the *fuck* should I let him go!"

"As far as you're concerned, his life is a life, but mine doesn't count, is that it?!" In a fit of rage, Mo Ran grabbed Chu Wanning's hand without warning and pressed it to his bloody wound. "Didn't you want to stop me? Fine, here's your chance, go on and dig out my heart then! —Chu Wanning, why don't you just dig out my fucking heart then!!!!"

"....." The tips of Chu Wanning's fingers, cold as ice, trembled.

Mo Ran glared at him, furiously, ruthlessly, the veins at his neck throbbing. His voice was raw and raspy as he said, "Go on, dig it out."

The deluge of rain against the roof was frenzied madness.

Dead silence.

Neither moved.

An indeterminate amount of time passed before Mo Ran finally let go of Chu Wanning's hand and, breaths low and harsh, declared in a deep voice, "I'm taking Xue Ziming and Mei Hanxue's lives."

"....."

"Go ahead and hate me, Shizun," he said, "My life's already like this anyway, *our* lives are already like this. None of us can turn back now, so might as well just keep going in the darkness. I'll just drag some old friends along for company on my way to hell."

That day, looking at the black robes on his back as he walked away, Chu Wanning finally spoke.

He said, "Mo Ran, if you destroy Taxue Palace and kill Xue Meng, then I'll die in front of you. I have nothing left to trade you with, but at least I can still choose death."

Hearing that, Mo Ran paused before turning to look over his shoulder, a smile spreading across his handsome face against the dreary backdrop of wind and rain.

"This Venerable One will not allow you to die."

"....."

"Lest you forget, even when all the blood had drained out of your body, I still managed to take you back from the very gates of death. You're gonna spend the rest of this life with me no matter how much you disgust me." After venting his madness, Mo Ran's expression gradually returned to its usual calm, cold and threatening. He said, "My good Shizun, just be good and stay here at Sisheng Peak. When I capture Xue Meng, I'll bring him back here so he can get a good long look at the god that he worries over day and night, writhing under me like a wanton little slut. After all, in consideration of our shared past, it's only right that I grant him the courtesy of full comprehension before he dies."

But, against all expectations, Chu-zongshi was still Chu-zongshi.

One month later, standing proudly at the summit of Kunlun Mountain, in front of the Heavenly Lake, Mo Ran did exactly what he said he would. He captured Mei Hanxue and Xue Meng and tied them to pillars of ice before using Zhenlong Chess Formation to control all the thousands at Taxue Palace to slaughter one another as they were forced to watch.

The snowy mountain, once pristine and majestic, was dyed crimson in an instant. Blood ran into the lake, seeped into the ground.

Mo Ran sat calmly before the palace gates, eating grapes brought by the servants and smiling as he watched the scene.

Looking at Xue Meng, his eyes glazed and unfocused, he asked, "Mengmeng, do you like it?"

"....." Xue Meng didn't react, as if having lost his hearing.

Pleased, Mo Ran smiled even more affectionately as he said, "Cousin staged this show just for you, are you enjoying it?"

"...Spare Taxue Palace."

Came a faint, abrupt murmur. Mo Ran blinked. "What?"

"Spare Taxue Palace." There was no light in Xue Meng's usually bright eyes. "Let them go, let Mei Hanxue go... I was the one who tried to kill you that time. Just kill me, leave everyone else out of it."

Mo Ran couldn't help but laugh. "Are you trying to talk terms with me?"

"No." Xue Meng's eyes were hollow as he said, "I'm begging you."

The darling of the heavens said, *I'm begging you*.

Mo Ran's eyes gleamed, the demon in his heart delighted by these words. As if amused, he gripped Xue Meng by the jaw and forced him to look up at himself, and was just about to say something when a burst of radiant green lit up the skyline.

"What's going on?"

His retinue didn't even get a chance to respond before a spiritual array, flowing and resplendent, stretched out from high above the towering peak to cover all the thousands of miles of Kunlun Mountain.

And there, above the array, stood Chu Wanning, robes white as snow fluttering lightly amongst the clouds.

A guqin of an unusual shape hung in the air before him, pitch black all over with its tail end curving upwards into a flourish of branches blooming with dew-laden haitang blossoms that glowed with a luminous radiance.

—Chu Wanning's third holy weapon, "Jiu'ge"^[3].

Author's Notes:

Even though 0.5 mutt is hopelessly perverse and insane, but strangely I like writing 0.5-related plot events very much, hahahaha~

You're welcome to help previous timeline's Shizun ferociously whip this previous timeline mutt, hahaha~

❁ <https://twitter.com/ruoyeahs/status/1131821060309913600?s=20>

Ch.100 Shizun's Last Words

Mo Ran's blood ran cold.

He had only ever seen Chu Wanning's guqin Jiu'ge once in his life, when he'd summoned it at their life or death battle before, its chords splitting the skies and sundering the clouds.

All that had been under the control of Zhenlong Chess Formation at the time, from the living people to the beasts and spirits, recovered their consciousness under the effect of Jiu'ge's chords, Mo Ran's million-strong army of chess pieces thrown into utter disarray by one song.

But summoning a holy weapon required use of the spiritual core and consumed a large amount of spiritual energy.

Chu Wanning couldn't even call Tianwen anymore, so how did he suddenly manage to call forth Jiu'ge, which was even stronger than Tianwen?

The battle above the Heavenly Lake that day had been no less fierce than the deathmatch between master and disciple back then.

But Mo Ran's memory of it was a blur, because, after that bloody battle, there was finally no one left by his side he could talk to.

Truth be told, in the last lifetime, all the way until death, Mo Ran never could figure out just how Chu Wanning was able to summon Jiu'ge using just the strength of his soul.

It was a kind of connection that didn't exist between any holy weapon and its master. But Chu Wanning managed it.

That day, in the sound of the guqin, Mo Ran's Zhenlong chess pieces shattered into dust one after another. Jiu'ge's strength was even more pure and indomitable than the first time he saw it many years ago, so much so that he had even suspected that Chu Wanning's spiritual core hadn't been shattered at all, that he had merely been faking it all those years, enduring the indignities and biding his time, waiting for the chance to take revenge in one fell sweep.

Later, he even couldn't help thinking, it'd be great if that really was the case. If Chu Wanning really was just pretending, then maybe things wouldn't have gone that far.

If only.

Jiu'ge nullified Mo Ran's forbidden magic, returning awareness to the cultivators that had been slaughtering one another, and even shattered the enchanted ice pillars that had been keeping Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue bound.

Mo Ran leapt high into the sky, robes whipping in the wind and eyes filled with both anger and delight. He couldn't wait to see just how many more surprising skills Chu Wanning had up his sleeves.

He landed on top of the barrier and strode over to stand before Chu Wanning.

That pair of pale, slender hands slowed and laid over the strings of the guqin, halting its sound.

Chu Wanning lifted his head, his face pale like snow beneath the sun. He spoke, "Mo Ran. Come closer."

Not knowing why, he walked over.

Chu Wanning moved his fingers and several streams of jade colored light flew toward Mo Ran's chest. He was startled for a moment, thinking that Chu Wanning meant to kill him.

But the light didn't hurt at all, only hovering in front of his chest before diffusing slowly into his skin and flesh, bringing with it untold warmth.

"I've healed your wound from Xue Meng," Chu Wanning let out a soft sigh. "So just let him off, Mo Ran. If even he's gone, who will you go to in the future when you want to reminisce about the past..."

Mo Ran didn't even have time to process the meaning behind his words when the sturdy barrier beneath his feet disappeared abruptly, along with Chu Wanning's summoned guqin, Jiu'ge.

He immediately raised his hand to call forth his blade Bu'gui to maintain his footing between the clouds, but Chu Wanning fell, gentle like a wilted leaf, as if the song just now had exhausted all that remained of his strength.

"WANNING!"

His expression changed immediately as he urged his blade downwards, catching that person in his arms just before he would have fallen into the ice-cold waters of the Heavenly Lake.

"Chu Wanning! You—you..."

Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. Blood seeped from his nose, his mouth, his eyes, his ears.

He had always valued his dignity, keeping his back ramrod straight even when he was imprisoned at Wushan Palace and rarely ever allowing his appearance to be anything less than prim and pristine. But now he bled from all seven orifices of the face, that usually clear and refined countenance a disheveled mess.

Chu Wanning swallowed a mouthful of blood and said in a hoarse voice, "You said... that life or death is not up to me... but you see, Mo Ran... you've underestimated your Shizun after all... if I've made up my mind to leave, you can't stop me... even if you tried..."

"...Shizun...Shizun..." Mo Ran stared at him, feeling a chill wash over his heart, feeling his scalp go numb as he called out helplessly.

Chu Wanning smiled, his expression seeming almost glad. "I've kept living these past few years because I didn't want to give up, always thinking... thinking that I'll just keep you company for a few more years, try to teach you... not to commit any more sins... but now... now..."

Mo Ran trembled as he held the person in his arms. He suddenly felt terrified.

Terrified.

Such an emotion hadn't been part of him for more than ten years, but now it rushed back in a wave, nearly carving out his heart.

"Now I know that, perhaps, it takes my death for you to... stop doing evil..."

He stopped talking, as if in immense pain. Forcibly summoning Jiu'ge was more than his body could handle, and his insides were ripping apart, another mouthful of blood spilling forth. Mo Ran, holding him in his arms, landed by the Heavenly Lake, his expression crazed with an undertone of anguish as he channeled spiritual energy into his chest nonstop.

But that powerful stream of spiritual energy only sunk uselessly into Chu Wanning's body like a clay ox into the sea.

Mo Ran panicked. Taxian-Jun clutched the person in his arms tightly to himself, trying and failing, again and again, to give him spiritual energy.

"It's useless... Mo Ran, I used the last of my life to summon Jiu'ge, this is it for me. But if you... still have any clarity in your heart... then please... forgive..."

Forgive whom?
Xue Meng, Mei Hanxue?
Kunlun Taxue Palace, or the entire cultivation world?
Yes, yes... he'd forgive them all! As long as Chu Wanning lived, as long as this person he hated to the core didn't die like this.

Chu Wanning lifted a trembling hand, and a cold fingertip—as if in pity, but also almost tenderly—poked lightly at his forehead.
He said, “Then please...forgive...forgive yourself...”

The ferocity on Mo Ran's face froze in that instant.
Forgive whom...
As he lay dying, just whom was he worrying over?
Forgive...yourself...
Was that what he said?

Holding him in his arms, Taxian-Jun seemed somewhat at a loss, but also somewhat delighted; anguished, but also perfectly contented.

“Forgive myself? Your last wish is for me to forgive myself?”

Mo Ran muttered, eyes bloodshot, then he suddenly burst into laughter, laughter that sounded like a raging inferno piercing through the skies and burning away all reason and rationality.

“HAHAHA——HAHAHAHAHA——FORGIVE MYSELF? CHU WANNING, YOU'RE EVEN CRAZIER THAN ME! HOW NAIVE——HAHAHAHAHA——”

All of Kunlun Mountain echoed with his deranged, miserable laughter, his twisted, unrecognizable, terrifying laughter.

Surrounded by the sound of Mo Ran's crazed laughter, Chu Wanning swallowed another mouthful of blood. If he still had the strength, his expression would've been one of anguish, but he didn't even have the strength to furrow his brows anymore, only that pair of phoenix eyes... those eyes that had once been sharp, or resolute, or harsh, or gentle, those eyes were now filled with sorrow.

Clear as the snow over the Heavenly Lake, hazy as the frost over the roof tiles.

Slowly, Chu Wanning's eyes grew unfocused, his pupils dilating. Slowly, what had once been bright and sharp as lightning could no longer see clearly.

In the end, he said in a quiet voice, “Don't laugh anymore, I can't bear to see you like this...”

“.....”

“Mo Ran, this whole life, no matter what happened in the end... it's all because I failed to teach you well, because I called you deficient by nature and beyond remedy... It was I who wronged you; I won't blame you, in life or in death...” There was no color left on Chu Wanning's bloodless face, even his lips were a pale blue. Arduously, he lifted his gaze to look at Mo Ran's face; he wanted to cry, but it was blood that flowed slowly from his eyes and trickled down his face.

Chu Wanning wept. He said, “Do you... truly hate me so much... that you will not grant me so much as a moment of peace... even at the very end...”

“Mo Ran...Mo Ran... don't do this anymore, wake up, turn back... turn back...”

Wake up...

He told him to wake up, but he himself, with his hollow eyes open, went to sleep.

Mo Ran didn't believe, he refused to believe, that Chu Wanning had died just like this.

That the great zongshi of an era, high and lofty, his Shizun, the person he hated the most, had died just like this.

Lying in his arms at the edge of a Heavenly Lake dyed red by blood.
Growing cold, bit by bit, cold as frost, frozen like ice.

Chu Wanning's face was covered in blood. Mo Ran stared for a bit with his head lowered, then raised his sleeve and tried to wipe it clean.

But there was too much blood. The more he wiped, the more he dirtied that originally clear and clean face. Mo Ran pressed his lips together and wiped harder.

All he got was a face smeared with blood.
Even the facial features were hard to see now.

He finally stopped laughing.

Closing his eyes, he murmured quietly, "You won this time, Chu Wanning. I couldn't stop you from dying."

He paused, then opened his eyes back up. They were deep and dark, yet a fire burned within the abyss.

He continued, "But you've underestimated me as well. I can't stop you if you don't want to live, but you also can't stop me if I don't want you to die."

Without publicizing his death, Mo Ran brought Chu Wanning back to Sisheng Peak.

He was already immensely powerful by then, well capable of keeping a dead body from decay for all of time—so he kept Chu Wanning's body at the Red Lotus Pavilion, forced him to "live on" like this.

It was too difficult for him to acknowledge that he had killed the last person in the world who still worried for him.

As long as he could keep Chu Wanning's body from turning into ash; as long as he could still look at him every day.

He could still think that Chu Wanning wasn't dead.

And there would still be somewhere for him to unload his deranged hatred, somewhere for him to entrust his twisted love.

Taxian-Jun had finally gone completely insane.

After Chu Wanning left, he would go to the Red Lotus Pavilion every single day to look at his corpse. At first, eyes flashing with malice, he would spit and curse before that body, saying, "Chu Wanning, it's what you deserve."

"You cared for every single person beneath the sun *but* me, you hypocrite."

"What kind of master even are you? I must've been fucking blind back then to take you as my master! You bastard!"

And then, later, he would ask, relentlessly, every single day, "What're you doing still asleep? When are you gonna wake up?"

"I've already let Xue Meng go, isn't that enough for you? Get up already."

Every time he said such things, the servants by his side wondered if he had lost it and gone mad.

His wife, Song Qitong, also thought he had gone mad. The prospect frightened her, and so, lying beside him after a rare night of intimacy, she took the chance to say, "A-Ran, the dead won't come back. I know you're sad, but..."

"Who's sad?"

"....."

Song Qitong was adept at reading faces, especially after these years spent at Mo Ran's side, every step careful like treading on thin ice. Seeing his ill-tempered expression, she immediately shut up and lowered her eyes, saying, "This one misspoke."

"No no," but Mo Ran didn't let her off so easily this time, narrowing his eyes as he pressed, "since you've already spit it out, don't just swallow it again. Go on, tell me, who's sad?"

"Your Majesty..."

There was thunder in Mo Ran's dark eyes. He sat up abruptly and seized Song Qitong by her delicate neck, lifting the woman he had just entwined with in one hand and throwing her off the bed.

His face twisted into something dangerous and beast-like.

"What do you mean the dead won't come back, who's dead? Who's not coming back?" Mo Ran pushed each word past gritted teeth, aggressively and forcefully. "No one's dead, no one needs to come back, and no one's sad!"

Song Qitong's lips quivered; she wanted to struggle, but as soon as she uttered the words "Red Lotus Pavilion..." just that half of a sentence, and Mo Ran was already seeing red.

"What are you trying to say, there's no one but a sleeping Chu Wanning at the Red Lotus Pavilion! What exactly are you trying to suggest! Bitch!"

Seeing him fly into an uncontrollable rage, Song Qitong's heart lurched, unsure what outrageous insanity he might do at this rate, and so she threw caution to the winds and gambled it all, raising her voice to say, "Your Majesty, that person lying in the Red Lotus Pavilion is already dead, yet you wallow there every day, how can this one... how can this one not worry?"

She picked her words carefully to avoid blame, even framing her own selfish desire as concern for Mo Ran.

Mo Ran stared at her, his breathing gradually calming down as if the words had gotten through to him somewhat. He stopped raging at her.

He took a moment to steady himself before saying, "I've made you worry."

Song Qitong let out a breath of relief. "This one wishes only for Your Majesty's well-being, and would gladly die for it. Your Majesty is deeply compassionate, but you must not be so despondent."

"Then how do you think this Venerable One *should* be?"

"Forgive this one for saying so, this one only means well for Your Majesty, but it's time to bury Chu... Chu-zongshi... he's already gone, keeping his empty body around like this will only cause Your Majesty more pain."

"And? You have more to say, don't you? Might as well let it all out today."

Seeing his expression gradually relax, the heart in Song Qitong's throat settled back down in her chest.

She lowered her eyelashes and tilted her head slightly with her eyes half-lidded; she knew that she looked most like Shi Mingjing this way.

She was well aware that Shi Mingjing was Mo Weiyu's weakness, though she couldn't understand why it was that, no matter how much she dressed up like him and carefully imitated his demeanor, she just couldn't arouse Mo Ran's interest.

Although this temperamental man liked her company, he only ever touched her when he was either feeling very low or very drunk. Song Qitong thought that maybe it was because Mo Ran didn't really like women, but whatever it was, it clearly had nothing to do with Shi Mingjing.

Not just her, but all of Sisheng Peak knew that the man who died many years ago was Emperor Taxian-Jun's true love.

What the hell was Chu Wanning.

Song Qitong felt that he was no more than a plaything used by Taxian-Jun to vent his lust, a man he had already grown tired of fucking. Chu Wanning may have traded his life for Mo Weiyu's disquietude and remembrance, but she knew it was nothing more than a momentary guilt, a temporary feeling of being unaccustomed.

She was confident in her face, this face that looked like Shi Mingjing; that living dead in the Red Lotus Pavilion was no match for her on this basis alone.

But Mo Ran can't be allowed to continue on in his madness like this. The world these days was in chaos, wars left and right, and she was terrified that she might have chosen to follow the wrong master—she wasn't young anymore; if Mo Ran was to lose his standing, she probably wouldn't be able to find another sky-reaching tree on which to climb to the top. And so she sincerely, wholeheartedly hoped that Mo Ran would pull himself together and stop being insane.

So she mulled it over, weighing the risks against the rewards, and in the end summoned up the courage to say, "And once Chu-zongshi is gone, there will be none worthy of the Red Lotus Pavilion."

Mo Ran said, "Right. Go on."

"This one thinks, with that being the case, the pavilion will only remind Your Majesty of the past, so..."

"So?" Mo Ran narrowed his eyes.

"So perhaps it'd be best to seal away the Red Lotus Pavilion after this. A pavilion serving only one master is a good tale."

Author's Notes:

Miss Song is working towards her great demise.

Miss Song's graduation thesis 《An essay on how tragically one can die if they lack the ability to grasp the heart of the situation》

Big white cat's talking corpse: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Depraved Taxian-Jun of the previous lifetime: Me? You dare to make this venerable one read out the thanks? Sure, see if anyone thanks you tomorrow, hmph.

Ch.101 Shizun, the Last Flame in This World

Mo Ran said nothing for a long while. Then he smiled brightly.

"A pavilion serving only one master is a good tale, huh. Well said."

His shapely feet trod casually across the ice cold surface of the stone floor, the blue vein on top flexing as he came to a stop in front of Song Qitong.

Then Mo Ran lifted one foot and tipped Song Qitong's chin up with his toes, forcing her to look up at himself.

"You've been keeping all this bottled up for quite a while, hm?"

He looked at her frightened, panicked face with a smile. "Empress Song, you know, there *were* a number of things in the past that I never asked you about. Since you're feeling so generous with these words from the bottom of your heart today, why don't we just just it all out, hm? Come, let's have a nice chat."

"Let's start with the most recent one. The day I went to Taxue Palace, I clearly remember locking Chu Wanning in the sleeping palace before leaving. So tell me, how did he appear at Kunlun Mountain? Just who let him out and allowed him to come find me?"

Song Qitong's entire body shuddered. She said, "I don't know!"

She was in such a panic to explain herself that she even forgot to say "this one", slipping into "I" instead.

Mo Ran said with a smile, "Alright, you don't know about this one. Next one, then. That year, when I made you empress, I also assigned you to manage Sisheng Peak. And then I had to go to Yin Mountain afterwards to take care of some stuff. Chu Wanning was being disobedient at the time, so I had him locked in the water prison to reflect on himself..."

Song Qitong's face grew pale as he brought up this matter, and her lips began to quiver.

"Using prison inspection as an excuse, you went to visit him, but were thoroughly scorned by him..."

"Y-yes," Song Qitong said hurriedly, "but Your Majesty... A-Ran, I've already told you about this incident back when it happened, Chu-zongshi had told me to get lost in such a disparaging manner, and then even proceeded to insult not only myself but Your Majesty as well. I couldn't hold back my anger at the time... I..."

"This Venerable One knows," Mo Ran smiled faintly. "You couldn't hold back your anger at the time, but Chu Wanning had committed grave crimes, and his punishment couldn't be arbitrarily increased without this Venerable One's permission. So you carried out a minor discipline, had all ten of his nails pulled out and stinging thorns inserted into the tip of each finger."

Song Qitong's eyes were filled with panic as she scrambled to say, "Your Majesty, you praised me for doing well when you returned!"

Mo Ran smiled, "Oh...? Did I?"

"You... you said that those with a foul mouth should be treated exactly so, and you even told this one that the punishment was a bit light, that if he speaks rudely again in the future, to... to break his fingers..." Her voice trailed off as she spoke until, in the end, looking at the terrifying smile on Mo Ran's face, she collapsed to the ground with tears in her eyes. "A-Ran..."

Mo Ran let out a soft sigh. He smiled, "Qitong, that was so long ago, this Venerable One no longer remembers what he said or didn't say back then."

"....." She had already guessed Mo Ran's intention just now, but her body still shuddered violently at his words.

"This Venerable One's been having dreams lately. Dreams about that day, returning from Yin Mountain and going to the water prison to find him with both hands festered and covered in blood..." Mo Ran spoke slowly, but his voice suddenly tightened toward the end, and a cold light flashed in his eyes. "This Venerable One was not happy."

Song Qitong said helplessly, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty... no, A-Ran... let me explain... please calm down and let me explain..."

"This Venerable One was not happy."

But Mo Ran only continued on as if he had heard nothing, lowering his face, devoid of any expression, to look coolly at the woman huddled on the floor.

"Indulge me a bit, won't you?"

His expression like frost and snow, paired with such a haughty request, gave Song Qitong goosebumps and made her scalp go numb in spite of all her years at his side with her life on the line like cohabiting with a ferocious tiger. She could smell the scent of the coming storm. Lifting her dark brown eyes, she looked meekly up at him as she crawled over and nestled by his ankles.

"Of course, anything A-Ran says. What can I do to make A-Ran happy? I'll definitely... definitely..."

Mo Ran leaned over and grabbed her jaw, forcing her face upwards.

He put on a lovely, innocent smile.

Just like the one he wore back when he first saw her at Rufeng Sect, showing twin pools of sweet dimples as he pulled at her sleeve and said, "Little shimei, what's your name? ...Aiyah, don't be afraid, I won't hurt you. Talk to me, okay?"

She shuddered.

After so many years, with practically the same expression and the same tone, he said something else altogether.

He said, sweetly and gently, "Qitong, this Venerable One knows you mean it, that you'll do anything to make this Venerable One happy..."

His fingertip caressed her soft lips.

The part of her that looked most like Shi Mingjing.

Mo Ran's eyelashes trembled slightly as he stared calmly at that pair of petal-like lips. In the end, he said, "Then go wait for this Venerable One on the road to hell."

"!!!"

Gently, he asked, "Okay?"

Tears welled past Song Qitong's eyes immediately, not out of sadness, but out of fear. She already knew, as soon as Mo Ran brought up her abuse of Chu Wanning back then, that it wasn't going to end well for her, but the most she thought it'd be was punishment by the rod or losing her title; she never, not even with all of her courage, thought that Mo Ran would actually...

That he'd actually! That he could actually bear to!

He... he...

Madman.

He's gone mad...he's gone mad...

Mo Ran threw his head back and began to laugh in a low voice, his laughter growing increasingly more arrogant and unrestrained. He laughed as he kicked open the door of the sleeping palace, laughed as he strode outside.

He had always tread with abandon, had trampled countless lives, and now it was her turn.

He's gone mad...he's gone mad!!!!

Mo Weiyu has gone mad!!!!

Song Qitong collapsed to her knees on the floor of ice-cold stone and golden bricks. The passion of intimacy within the sleeping palace had not yet dissipated, but the fires of hell had already begun to burn. With her mouth hanging open and her head tilted back, she struggled to look at the sky outside the palace.

It was the break of dawn, and the sky was the color of blood.
Dying red her bloodshot eyes.

In the distance, she heard Mo Ran call, as casual as if he was ordering dinner for the day.

“Guards, take the empress away.”

“Your Majesty——!” Came the panicked reactions of the retinue outside.
“Your Majesty, this...”

“Toss her in the cauldron, fry her alive.”

Song Qitong suddenly couldn't hear anything anymore, like she had sunken deep into the sea, couldn't hear anything anymore.

“Fry her alive. Fry her alive, it'll be a lively good time that way.
Haha...HAHAHA...”

He walked further and further away, but the sound of his laughter and shouting lingered over Sisheng Peak like an overflying eagle for a long time.

The rising sun cast a long shadow behind him, a lonely figure on the ground. Slowly, slowly, he walked.

At first, there almost seemed to be the silhouettes of two youths standing with him, and a tall man in white robes.

Then the two silhouettes disappeared, leaving only the white robes to accompany him.

He kept walking, and the white-robed man also disappeared into the golden dawn.

The rising sun was pure and unblemished, and it took away those who were similarly pure and unblemished, leaving only him alone in hell, in an ocean of blood, sinking into the masses of ghosts and fiends.

Leaving only him, all alone, getting lonelier and colder the further he walked.
He walked until he felt like he was already dead, that he had already died...

Becoming more and more deranged the further he walked.

Mo Ran remembered, during the year before he took his own life, that when he looked into the copper mirror, he couldn't even recognize the monster staring back at him sometimes.

He even remembered the night before he died, when he sat inside the bamboo pavilion at the Red Lotus Pavilion, with only an old servant keeping his company.

He had lazily asked that old servant, “Liu-gong, what kind of person did this Venerable One used to be?”

He continued on without waiting for an answer, staring at his reflection in the pond.

“This Venerable One didn't used to wear his hair like this when he was young, much less this tasseled crown, right?”

Liu-gong answered with a sigh, “It is as Your Majesty said. The crown and hairdo were at the recommendation of Empress Song after your accension to the

throne.”

“Oh, you mean Song Qiutong?” Mo Ran sneered and tipped his head back to take a drink of pear blossom white. “Did I really used to listen to her suggestions?”

Maybe because the end was near, and there was no more need to worry about accidentally prickling the emperor’s sore spot with a stray word and losing his head, but the drooping old man spoke the candid truth.

With his eyes downcast and his hands tucked into his sleeves, Liu-gong said, “Yes, when Your Majesty first ascended the throne, Empress Song was quite favored. There was a period of time when Your Majesty did everything the Empress asked, did... Your Majesty forget all of it?”

“Forget?” Mo Ran chuckled. “I didn’t forget. How could I possibly forget...”

After he’d married Song Qiutong, someone had leaked her the info that the reason he favored her was due solely to her likeness to the deceased Shi Mingjing.

She was a clever person, so she spared no effort looking into Shi Mei’s mannerisms and bearing, subtly exhibiting the same in their daily life as husband and wife, making it seem almost like the dead had come back.

How could he possibly forget.

Mo Ran smiled mirthlessly, then suddenly took the crown from atop his head and tossed it into the pond without even looking. Startled koi fish leapt from the water, and the person reflected in the water became warped and distorted.

Thus distorted, he undid his topknot and let down his inky hair. He learned by the pondside, letting the rippling, sparkling waters light up his face in a mercurial light.

“There we go. The crown’s gone, and the hair’s down. Old Liu, help me think, what does this Venerable One still need to return to his appearance before the enthronement?”

“Um...”

“A hair tie, right?” Mo Ran looked at his reflection as he said. “That blue hair tie commonly worn by the disciples of Sisheng Peak. Are there any left in the palace?”

“There is. Your Majesty charged this old one with the safekeeping of the disciple uniform you shed when you ascended to the throne. This old one will go bring it over if that’s what Your Majesty wishes.”

“Excellent. Go on, bring the whole set along with the hair tie.”

Liu-gong left and returned with a stack of old clothes in hand. Mo Ran sat up, and when the tips of his fingers touched the cotton and hemp texture, pieces of the past fluttered up like dried leaves to land on his heart that was full of holes. In a moment of excitement, he picked up an outer robe and tried to put it on.

But the clothing of his youth was already far too small, and it wouldn’t fit no matter how hard he tried.

He flew into a rage.

“Why doesn’t it fit! Why can’t I go back!!!”

He paced like a beast trapped in a cage, madness in his expression, eyes flickering with a dangerous light.

“This is this Venerable One’s clothing!! Is this this Venerable One’s clothing????!!!! Did you fetch the wrong set!!!! If it is this Venerable One’s clothing, then why would it not fit!!!!!! *Why would it not fit——!!!!*”

The old servant was already used to seeing his master in the grip of madness like this.

He used to think that Mo Ran was terrifying like this. But today, for some reason, he felt that he was pitiful instead.

He wasn't looking for clothes—he was looking for himself, the him of the past that could never come back.

"Your Majesty," the old man sighed faintly, "let it go; you're not that young man of the past anymore."

"....." Mo Ran was in the middle of raging, and, hearing these words, his head whipped around fiercely to glare at the old man's withered face. But it was as if he was choking on something, unable to get a single word out, only breathing harshly with red-rimmed eyes. A long time passed before he finally spoke, "I'm not...?"

"You're not."

"...I can't go back?"

"You can't go back."

For the first time, a childlike helplessness appeared on the face of that thirty two year old man. He closed his eyes, the jut of his throat bobbing. The old servant stood to the side with his head lowered, thinking that, once he opens his eyes, he'll surely snarl with his fangs out and shred everything before him.

But when Mo Ran opened his eyes again, there was a wetness in them.

Perhaps it was this wetness that put out the inferno in his heart.

Mo Ran opened his mouth and, in a voice that was hoarse and weary, murmured, "I see... I see... I can't go back... I can't go back..."

He put down the robe as if exhausted, sat down by the stone table, and buried his face in his hands.

A long while passed before he said, "Then I'll just tie my hair up."

"...Your Majesty...why do all this..."

"This Venerable One's life will end soon, don't want to be too lonely when the time comes." He kept his face in his hands as he spoke, his expression indiscernible. "I just want to change my clothes and feel like there are still old friends for company."

Liu-gong sighed, "That's just make-believe."

"Make-believe is fine."

Mo Ran said.

"Make-believe is better than nothing."

He pulled his long hair back, wrapping the hair tie around it once, twice. Then he picked up a hair clasp with faded edges from the pile of old clothes, thinking to clip it to the side of his hair like he used to when he was young, but then, looking at his reflection in the water, his hand stilled.

Which side was it on again, the left or the right?

He hadn't used this hair clasp for so long that he could no longer remember. Mo Ran closed his eyes, asking, "Old Liu, do you know how I used to wear my hair?"

"To answer Your Majesty, this old one only came to the palace two years after your enthronement. This old one does not know."

Mo Ran said, "But I can't remember, I need someone to tell me."

"....."

"Where can I find someone to tell me?" Mo Ran murmured. "Who can tell me what I... used to look like."

Old Liu let out a long sigh, but couldn't think of a single name. Truthfully, in his heart, Mo Ran also knew that the old man had no answer for him, and so, uncertainly, he held that black hair clasp to his left, then his right, before settling on the left side and clipping it there.

"That seems right," Mo Ran said. "Let me go ask him."

So he walked toward the inner parts of the pavilion, to the side of the red lotus pond where Chu Wanning's body laid, looking like he was only asleep.

Mo Ran sat down on the ground, propping his cheek in one hand as he said, "Shizun."

The breeze carried the faint fragrance of the lotus blossoms. Looking at that man lying amongst the vibrant, intoxicating red within the pond with his eyes closed, he suddenly felt like he had a lot he wanted to say, but at the same time didn't know what to say at all.

Toward Chu Wanning, he seemed to be always full of emotions, but those emotions were too jumbled, contained too many flavors, and amidst the sweet and the sour and the bitter and the spicy, he couldn't tell if he held more hatred toward this person or more of something else. He really, honestly didn't know how to act toward this person.

He had once told himself that the only reason he kept Chu Wanning by his side was to vent his hatred and sate his desires. But then Chu Wanning died, and he still kept this corpse that he could no longer even entwine with; even the grave had been prepared, but he just couldn't bear to bury him.

What was the use in keeping this cold, unmoving corpse that couldn't speak? Even he himself wasn't sure.

They've already gone through too much, and that tiny, clean thing at the start had already been completely drowned.

When Chu Wanning was still alive, the two of them rarely had any peaceful, amicable days together.

But now that Chu Wanning was dead, a kind of cruel gentleness grew between the living and the dead. Mo Ran came to visit him often, a jar of pear blossom white in hand, simply looking without saying much.

Right now, besieged on all sides, he knew that his life was at an end. And Chu Wanning's body was the only one left from his past in this Sisheng Peak that looked no different but held none of the same people, the only one who had stayed with him all this time.

Mo Ran suddenly wanted to have a nice, long heart-to-heart with this cold corpse. Chu Wanning was already dead anyway, he could neither protest nor berate him. No matter what he said, he would have no choice but to lie there and listen.

But when he tried to move his lips, his throat felt tight.
In the end, he only managed to say one thing.

"Shizun, pay attention to me."

Author's Notes:

Depraved 0.5 is in a craze again as he is usually, clutches face...who will drag this dog and get him vaccinated for rabies hahahaha

Big white cat's talking corpse: [thanking jjwxc readers]
Crazy 0.5 Mo Weiyu: Did this venerable one not scare you all yesterday? If so, then, [thanking jjwxc readers]

Ch.102 Shizun's Shizun

Shizun, pay attention to me.

That was the first thing Mo Ran had said when they first met in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

At that time, Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. Mo Ran called to him, and his eyelashes fluttered open.

That was also the last thing Mo Ran had said when they parted for the last time at the Red Lotus Pavilion.

At that time, Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. Mo Ran called to him, but he never again lifted his head.

That one sentence drifted for half a lifetime, from the Heaven-Piercing Tower to the edge of the lotus pond, and finally settled into dust.

All those years of hate and love scattered, went cold.

Mo Ran finished the last jar of pear blossom wine and went down from the southern peak of Sisheng Peak toward the eve of his final day. The next day, the rebel army charged into Wushan Palace to find that Taxian-Jun, a calamity upon the world for the past ten years, had taken his own life at the age of thirty two.

By now, two lifetimes have gone by.

Mo Ran opened his eyes.

He had slept through the night under the flowering tree before the Heaven-Piercing Tower and woke up dazed and lost, unable to tell when he was.

Absently, he murmured, "Shizun...pay attention to me..."

Only then did he remember that, in this lifetime as well, Chu Wanning was already gone.

In the past life, he had gotten used to every day being a bitter struggle, and Chu Wanning was the one who had walked with him til the very end; he didn't want to be a vile person again in this life, but Chu Wanning wouldn't be around to see that now.

Maybe even the heavens couldn't bear it, or perhaps it was simply fate—Chu Wanning had already grown beyond disgusted with him in the past life, and so in this one he had become the first to leave.

Mo Ran laid his arm across his eyes, holding back the tightness in his throat.

He heard Xue Zhengyong shouting frantically in the distance. His uncle was looking for him, yelling, "Ran-er——where are you? Ran-er!"

Shi Mei was calling for him as well, "A-Ran, where are you... hurry and come out..."

"Ran-er, come back and keep Yuheng company! Don't do anything stupid, Ran-er!!"

Keep Yuheng company...

Keep him company...

Mo Ran scrambled up from the ground and stumbled unsteadily toward the voices.

He can't collapse, he can't collapse——there are lots of things he still has to do, the person behind everything hasn't been found yet, not to mention the Heavenly Rift could happen again at any time. Sisheng Peak had suffered heavy losses in the catastrophe, and there were countless things needing to be taken care of... Xue Meng was already heartbroken from grief, so anguished he couldn't even get up. He can't also collapse.

So he endured it, forced himself to carry on.

He told himself, it doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt.

It's not the first time he's been through Chu Wanning's death. It doesn't hurt.

It doesn't hurt...

But how could it not hurt!

Over three thousand steps, he had crawled, carrying him on his back, how could it not hurt...

Draining the very last bit of his spiritual energy, giving it all to him, how could it not hurt...

He had suffered the same injury, but for the sake of not burdening his disciple, he had put on a heartless expression and left by himself... how could it not hurt...

And in the past life, Chu Wanning had actually suffered the same injury as Shi Mei, it's just that he didn't say anything about it. He didn't say, and Mo Ran didn't know.

So he roared angrily at Chu Wanning, vented endless hatred on him, flipped to the ground those wontons that Chu Wanning, who hadn't even recovered from his own injuries yet, had worked so hard to make for him.

Chu Wanning had bent down in front of him, lowered his head, and then, one by one, picked them up and threw them away.

How...could it...not hurt...

How could it have not hurt!!!!

He had dug out Chu Wanning's heart! How could it have not hurt!!! How could it...

Mo Ran couldn't walk anymore. He stood in place for a long while, trying to suppress it, trying to calm down; his entire body trembled.

It hurts.

He buried his face in his hands, bit down on his lip, swallowed his sobs together with the blood.

A long, long while passed before he managed, just barely, to pull himself together.

He lifted his head, eyes red-rimmed, and drew in a deep breath. And then, slowly, he walked down the steps.

He can't collapse.

"Uncle."

"Ran-er, where did you go? You worried me half to death! How am I gonna face Yuheng in the afterlife if something happens to you?"

"It was my fault," Mo Ran said. "I'm okay now, sorry to have made Uncle worry."

Xue Zhengyong shook his head, not quite sure what to say, and so only patted Mo Ran's shoulder. After a long moment, he said, "It's not your fault, it's not your fault, you're already so much stronger than Meng-er... *sigh*..."

Mo Ran asked in a hoarse voice, "Where's Xue Meng?"

"Sick. He has a high fever, just drank his medicine and went to sleep. He's inconsolable when awake, just crying all day... it's good that he's asleep," Xue Zhengyong looked exhausted. "The Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells caused a huge wave in the cultivation world. Even the upper cultivation world has begun to send people to look into the matter. But the person behind it covered his tracks extremely well; Butterfly Town was practically levelled in the bloody battle, leaving no clues to be found."

Hearing this, Mo Ran wasn't at all surprised. That person's abilities were clearly beyond what anyone, including himself, had expected.

Someone who could take Chu Wanning's life obviously wouldn't be careless enough to leave any traces.

"What do the upper cultivation realm people plan to do?"

Xue Zhengyong replied, "They're holding a meeting at Spiritual Mountain with representatives from each sect to discuss the matter. I'm leaving for it tomorrow... but I'm worried about leaving when Meng-er is like this..."

He was right—now that even the number one zongshi in the world Chu Wanning had lost his life in the incident at Butterfly Town, the upper cultivation world cannot simply sit by and watch anymore, however negligent they might be.

"Just who laid down the spells to open up the barrier?"

"What is he after?"

"What's his next move?"

These questions circled in everyone's hearts like vultures. Everyone wanted to know the answers, but extensive investigations had yielded nothing, so there was no choice left but to cooperate.

Mo Ran said, "Uncle, don't worry, I'll help Aunt take care of things in the sect while you're gone."

"That's good, that's good... aye... I really hate having to burden you."

Xue Zhengyong left, and Xue Meng spent all day spacing out, so all the accumulated scrolls of paperwork and jobs fell to Mo Ran.

Mo Ran threw himself into the work, not daring to rest for even one moment, because if he stops to rest, stops to think, then the anguish and regret will drag him down into the abyss and torture his broken soul. He wished that he could bury his head in the scrolls day and night so that he wouldn't have to contend with the endless torment and guilt in his heart.

When the Infinite Hells opened, Yin energy had flooded the mortal realm, and all manners of fiends that had long been suppressed seized the opportunity to escape and wreck havoc across the land. These days, the letters of commission requesting aid from Sisheng Peak have practically piled up into a small mountain. Mo Ran busied himself taking care of it all, forgetting to sleep and skipping on meals, often heading into Loyalty Hall at the break of dawn and staying until late at night before going back to rest.

But even buried in the ocean of paperwork like this, he would still get pricked unawares by the fragments of Chu Wanning left behind.

"...Qingjiang region has been troubled as of late, and most of the eighty two families in Fengling Village are old and ailing, without any means of defense. We are fortunate to have a Holy Night Guardian golem made by your esteemed sect's elder to fend off the fiends for the time being, but it is not a long term solution, so we would like to request..."

A droplet of candle wax slid slowly down, and the wick crackled.

Mo Ran came to with a start; he had been spacing out at the letter for a long time, his finger smoothing over the words “Holy Night Guardian” over and over, and the image in his mind was that of Chu Wanning in the Red Lotus Pavilion, his hair pulled back in a ponytail, holding a sanding file in his mouth as he concentrates on oiling a golem.

Mo Ran let out a long exhale and pressed his fingers to his forehead, rubbing lightly.

Suddenly, he heard someone knocking.

“Shi Mei?”

Dressed in light, simple white robes, the beautiful young man walked in holding a tray and set it down next to Mo Ran’s scrolls, then rolled up his sleeves and stirred the candlelight back into brightness, saying in a gentle voice, “A-Ran, you’ve been working all day, have something to eat.”

“...Alright.”

Mo Ran forced a smile and put down his scroll, kneading at the throbbing pain between his brows.

“I made a bowl of ginseng chicken soup and a couple plates of side dishes,” Shi Mei set out the dishes and felt the temperature through the bowl. “Oh, good, they’re still warm.”

While eating, Shi Mei noticed a loose strand of hair hanging before that handsome but tired-looking face, and reached out to tuck it back in for him.

“A-Ran.”

“Hm?”

“That day... there was something you wanted to say to me?”

Mo Ran’s mind was a jumbled mess, not quite catching on for a moment. He glanced at him and asked, “Which day?”

“.....” Shi Mei pursed his lips and lowered his gaze. “When the Heavenly Rift happened.”

“.....”

“You said you were going to go help...help Shizun mend the Heavenly Rift, and that there was something, that if you still felt like telling me when you came back, then...” He lowered his head, voice drifting off.

In the light of the candle, Shi Mei’s delicate, snow-white ears seemed a little red.

Mo Ran stared for a long time, but couldn’t force a single word out.

He knew, without a doubt, that he loved Shi Mei dearly. But right now, in this moment, he really wasn’t in the mood, not even a little bit.

He was shameless and unmannerly, couldn’t care less what others said, and knew nothing of things like morality and etiquette.

But that didn’t mean he was heartless.

“Sorry,” a long moment passed in silence before Mo Ran finally said in a soft voice. “I feel really down right now, and I... don’t think now is the time for this, so, about that thing, I’ll tell you some other time, okay?”

Shi Mei’s head snapped up, his beautiful eyes startled.

Mo Ran forced out a chuckle and raised his hand, then hesitated for a moment before patting Shi Mei’s head. “I’m kind of dumb, and there have been

so many things to take care of lately, I... I don't know when I'll have a quiet moment to gather my thoughts. I don't want to be careless about it."

Even the warmth of the candle couldn't conceal the gradual blanching of Shi Mei's face.

"Careless?"

He paused, then suddenly smiled.

"A-Ran, it was life or death back then, I thought that what you were going to say at a time like that would've been something you've already given careful thought to."

"I have," Mo Ran furrowed his brows. "I've thought about it for a long time, and it's never changed, but..."

"But?"

"...But not right now."

Mo Ran's hands clenched into fists in his sleeves.

"Not right now, Shi Mei. You don't know this, but that thing is very important, I don't want to rush it and tell you at such a miserable time, I..."

"Young master!"

A junior suddenly barged in unannounced, only to see that the one managing sect matters in Loyalty Hall was Mo Ran, and hurriedly lowered his head in a bow, saying, "Ah, Mo-gongzi."

Having been interrupted like this, the faint blush on Shi Mei's face faded away as he flicked his sleeves and sat back from where he was leaning forward, taking on a mild, unassuming appearance.

Mo Ran looked up, not noticing this change in his demeanor. "What is it?"

"R-reporting in, there's an esteemed guest at the sect entrance."

"An esteemed guest?" Mo Ran repeated, "anyone of note from the ten great sects is at Spiritual Mountain right now, where's this esteemed guest from?"

The disciple seemed both scared and excited, face flushed and stammering incoherently for a while before finally managing to say, "I-it's Master Huaizui^[4] of Wubei^[5] Temple!!!!"

"What?!"

Even the ex-Emperor Taxian-Jun Mo Ran couldn't help abruptly getting to his feet, and Shi Mei was startled as well.

"Master Huaizui?"

It was not for nothing that Mo Ran was so shocked—this Master Huaizui was practically a legend in the cultivation world.

This person had long ago achieved enlightenment and ought to have ascended. But when the great gates of the heavenly realm opened for him, he had pressed his palms together and said that he could not break with the mortal realm, could not let go of his lifelong obsession, and could not wash himself of past sins. In the end, the heavenly light disappeared, the lotus blossom wilted, and Master Huaizui ambled away from immortality in his worn-out monk robes, monk staff tapping lightly against the ground.

After declining his chance to ascend and become an immortal, he went into seclusion at Wubei Temple to reflect, and a hundred years passed in the blink of an eye.

One hundred years hence, the cultivation world has only heard of his name without ever seeing his person, and the number of seniors still living who had

met him could be counted on one hand.

In his past life, Mo Ran had turned the world upside down and still hadn't been able to meet with Master Huaizui. Huaizui had been far, far too old, and had passed away on a rainy spring day the year before Mo Ran climbed to the top of the human world; no one knew how old he was when he passed.

Unexpectedly, in this reborn life, Master Huaizui came calling on his own in a late night visit.

Countless thoughts flashed instantly through his mind—though he didn't yet know what exactly he came here for, Mo Ran immediately thought of those rumors about Master Huaizui.

Huaizui...Huaizui!

How could he have forgotten about Master Huaizui!

Last lifetime, when Shi Mei died, he didn't even know that there was such a sagely senior in the cultivation world due to his ignorance. It was only later, when he became emperor, that he learned from the reports of his subordinates that there actually existed a person in this world who could wield the "Rebirth" technique of the three forbidden techniques.

That person was Huaizui.

He had hurriedly sent people to Wubei Temple to request his presence, to call back Shi Mei's soul. But the people he sent returned with the news that the great master had already passed on, that he had missed his last chance to bring Shi Mei back.

But right now, this person of legend was still alive! He was still alive!!!!

How did he forget that! How *could* he forget?

Mo Ran's heart lurched, and he started trembling all over. A blaze glowed in his eyes as he shot to his feet and hastily said, "Hurry and invite the great master in!"

And then, before the reporting disciple even had a chance to respond, Mo Ran changed his mind. "Actually, I'll go welcome him in myself." But before he took two steps, there was a sudden flash of yellow from the outside.

Neither the candle nor its flame moved.

There wasn't even a hint of a breeze.

No one had seen how he came in, not even Mo Ran's sharp eyes, yet a monk wearing a bamboo hat and worn-out monk robes was already standing imposingly inside Loyalty Hall.

He had moved like lightning and stopped right in front of Mo Ran, the sudden proximity a bit startling.

"This one is imposing so late at night, and shall not trouble Mo-shizhu^[6] so."

A deep, mellow voice drifted out from beneath the bamboo hat, startling both Mo Ran and Shi Mei.

How was this the voice of a hundred-year-old man?

Before he had any time to think, the monk took off his bamboo hat. In the candlelit hall, he looked to be about thirty years of age, with a clear appearance and a mild demeanor. His eyes were bright and sharp, but they were calm and clear rather than menacing, like the reflection of light in waters.

"...You are..."

The monk put his palms together and bowed down low. "Amitabha^[7], this humble monk is Huaizui."

No one had expected Master Huaizui, who was at *least* a hundred years old, to look even younger than Xue Zhengyong. For a moment, there was only stunned silence.

But Mo Ran knew some things when it came to cultivation. Huaizui was someone who had rejected ascension and chose instead to stay in the mortal realm, and so was no different from an immortal other than that final step of shedding his mortal body and going through the heavenly trial^[8]. He relaxed a little after reasoning through it like that, but couldn't look away from Huaizui.

Huaizui didn't wish to disturb any more people, so it was just the three of them sitting down in Loyalty Hall. Mo Ran served tea to the great master personally. Huaizui accepted and uttered his thanks, but did not drink, only setting the tea aside on the small sandalwood table and then slowly raising his head.

He was mellow and polite, but cut straight to the point:

"Mo-shizhu, pray forgive this humble monk's forwardness, but the reason for this humble monk's coming today is a past acquaintance."

Mo Ran's heartbeat sped up abruptly; his vision swam and his fingers dug into the edge of the table with such strength that he nearly crushed it.

He stared intently at Master Huaizui's face as words from his past life resurfaced in his mind once again like drifting flakes of snow——

"There is a rumor that there is someone who has successfully used the Rebirth Technique of the three forbidden techniques. But it's just a rumor, there's no way to know whether there's any truth to it..."

"Where is this Master Huaizui? I'll pay any price to bring Shi Mei back!"

"To answer Your Majesty, Huaizui...has already passed away, many years ago. He wrote nothing in all his life, and, regarding Rebirth, he said only that 'The changing of fate is in defiance of Heaven's will, its dangers immeasurable.' Other than that, he left behind nothing else..."

The words streamed past his ears.

"Master Huaizui had an unfathomable grasp of mortality and reincarnation."

"Rumor has it that he had dealings with the ghost realm. If he yet lived, perhaps Mingjing-shixiong might be returned from the grave, but unfortunately, sigh..."

"Master Huaizui was like a ghost lingering in the world of the living. Anything and everything involving the Yin and the Yang, he definitely had a hand in."

Mo Ran drew in a deep breath, and was surprised to find that his voice trembled a little.

"Past acquaintance... past acquaintance..."

He murmured, his gaze locking with Master Huaizui's clear eyes.

With his back covered in a sheen of sweat, Mo Ran asked in a voice so quiet it was barely audible, "Who is this past acquaintance?"

The monk stood up slowly; in the dim candle light, there was no shadow beneath his feet.

The sleeves of his thin and simple yellow robe hung low. The robe was fairly worn out, but completely free of wrinkles and drifted lightly in the breeze like the flickering outline of a ghost. This great master was certainly impossible to read.

Mo Ran could practically hear the beating of his own heart. Subconsciously, he stood up with Huaizui, and the two of them gazed at one another.

“Great Master.” If there was a mirror in front of him right now, he would see the thread of hope that had appeared on his face unawares, and the pleading that followed in its wake. “Who... is this past acquaintance...”

Was it him?

Was it him?

Huaizui lowered his lashes and sighed as he pressed his palms together. “My disciple Chu Wanning perished seven days ago. Tonight is the night his soul is set to return. This humble monk cannot bear to send off one so young, and so came to Sisheng Peak to beg Mo-shizhu’s pity, that he might return this old monk his disciple.”

Author’s Notes:

Big white cat’s talking corpse: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Adorable Xue Meng: “.....”

Adorable Xue Meng is gravely ill and unable to get up.

We resort to yanking Dog, currently in system meltdown, over: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Ch.103 Shizun, I’m Coming to Find You

So it was... like that...

His disciple...

Mo Ran never would have thought that this exalted monk who was practically indifferentiable between human and ghost was actually Chu Wanning’s teacher, and for a moment, he was unable to speak.

It was Shi Mei who reacted first, bowing down immediately in a formal rite of respect and saying in a deferential tone, “I was unaware that the great master was thus related to our late master. This humble one offers Huaizui-shizu^[9] his sincere greetings.”

But Master Huaizui replies, “There’s no need to call me shizu, for Chu Wanning was expelled from the sect by this humble monk long ago.”

“Ah!” Shi Mei’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. “I see...” He was prudent by nature, so although he was curious, he understood from the faint wistfulness in Master Huaizui’s expression that he didn’t wish to talk about it, and so didn’t ask.

But Mo Ran’s thoughts were elsewhere; he pressed urgently, feeling like his very heart was being broiled alive, “Great master, you said that you came here for Shizun, so do you... do you have some means of bringing Shizun back?!”

“A-Ran...”

“Do you know how to bring him back! Tell me the truth! Do you... do you know how...” The rapid pumping of his heart together with the exhaustion from days of overworking made him feel lightheaded, and as his vision swam, the rest of the sentence caught in his throat, impossible to force out, but the rims of his eyes grew red.

Master Huaizui let out a sigh, "Mo-shizhu, pray take care. But yes, that is indeed why this old monk is here."

Mo Ran's face, originally pale as paper, flushed with color upon hearing these words. He stared fixedly at Master Huaizui, his bloodless lips quivering for a moment before managing to speak, "D... do you... really..."

"This old monk did not come to disturb this late at night only to prank the two shizhu."

Mo Ran still wanted to say something; his throat moved, but only a choked sob came out.

A long moment passed in silence before Master Huaizui said, "The Rebirth Technique alters fate in defiance of Heaven's will, and is no simple matter. This old monk truly owes Chu-zongshi overmuch, or he would not have resorted to such measures. Visiting Sisheng Peak was a decision made after many days of consideration."

"Altering fate in defiance of Heaven's will...?" Mo Ran murmured, turning the words over between his lips, then muttered miserably, "Altering fate in defiance of Heaven's will... if even a sinner like myself was given the opportunity to alter my fate in defiance of Heaven's will, then surely such a good person as he should be given the same?"

Half-crazed as he was in the moment, he had actually let slip his own "altering of fate in defiance of Heaven's will". Luckily he was mumbling indistinctly, and no one caught the implication between his words that he was also reborn.

Shi Mei said, "Shizu, since it alters fate in defiance of Heaven's will, and the Rebirth Technique itself is a forbidden technique, I imagine it must be extremely difficult to carry out, and... won't necessarily succeed... right?"

"Correct," Huaizui answered. "This technique involves not only the wielder and the deceased, it also requires a third person to go and find the totality of the deceased's soul. The journey to rebirth is full of hardships, and the slightest mistake could lead to eternal damnation and complete shattering of the soul."

Shi Mei: "....."

"For that reason, this old monk need not disturb anyone else, and came only to ask of Chu-zongshi's three disciples if you would be willing to tread fire and flood and go through untold dangers for him. If you are not, then even if this old monk opens the gate of rebirth, Chu Wanning still would not be able to return."

Even before Huaizui's explanation, Mo Ran had already guessed most of it.

The reason the three forbidden techniques were forbidden was because, unlike ordinary techniques, they required certain sacrifices and involved certain dangers.

In the last lifetime, he had been willing to give his life for Shi Mei; in this lifetime, he'd already decided that in order to repay his debt to Chu Wanning, he also would not hesitate.

Mo Ran wasn't heartless. It was just that, in the last lifetime, he was never willing to divide his heart and give Chu Wanning even the tiniest piece of it.

Under the candlelight, he looked directly at Master Huaizui as he said, "The great master need not ask Xue Meng. Shizun died because of me. There's no need to involve anyone else in this matter; I, Mo Ran, am willing to take on any and all dangers of this technique alone."

"A-Ran..." Shi Mei muttered, then turned to ask Huaizui, "Shizu's words were already sobering; what will the actual trial be like?"

Huaizui spoke, "Although Mo-shizhu is willing to undertake the risks himself, for the first step of this technique, the more people there are that are willing to take on the risks, the more likely it is to succeed. So let's wait for Xue-shizhu to get here first, and then this old monk will explain it to all of you. This old monk already asked someone to go call him upon first arriving here."

He paused, then smiled toward Shi Mei.

"On another note, please remember not to refer to this old monk as shizu. As mentioned earlier, this old monk no longer holds the position of being Chu-zongshi's shizun."

Now that Mo Ran was finally somewhat calmer, he asked, "Why did the great master... expel our Shizun from the sect?"

Shi Mei, speechlessly: "A-Ran..."

"No matter, it's not some unspeakable thing," Huaizui sighed. "When he was young, this humble monk once received the care of a benefactor. But the benefactor was ill-fated and lost his life protecting others during a calamity. It has been a hundred years hence, yet the thought of it still makes this humble monk uneasy. Thus the most important rule of our sect has always been that all disciples must focus solely on cultivation, and, until and unless they reach enlightenment, are forbidden from setting foot in the outside world and getting involved in the matters thereof, so as to not endanger their own lives."

Mo Ran thought about it for a while, then said, "Shizun couldn't do it."

"That's right," Huaizui forced a smile. "That little disciple of mine had the same temperament as my benefactor. He grew up in the temple, with little in the way of experience but an abundance of skill and talent. By all rights, he should have been able to cultivate into ascension without incident. But the year he came of age, he went down the mountain to collect ores, and just so happened to run into fleeing refugees..."

Shi Mei sighed, "That being the case, Shizun definitely wouldn't just stand there and watch."

Huaizui nodded. "Not only did he not just stand there and watch, after he found a place for the refugees, he left the mountain without permission to go look into how things were at the lower cultivation realm."

"....."

Sisheng Peak had only just been established back then, and the situation in the lower cultivation realm was far more chaotic than it is now. It went without saying what Chu Wanning saw.

"And when he returned, he told me that he wanted to put his cultivation training on hold so that he can go out into the world to help the injured and save lives."

Shi Mei asked, "Did you agree?"

"No."

"....."

"He was only fifteen then, with a pure, simple nature and a hot temper; it would've been far too easy for him to get deceived by someone. How could I possibly let him go out on his own? Besides, his cultivation was high, but his constitution was poor, and there are all kinds of dangers and dangerous characters out in the world. As his master, this humble monk truly could not help but worry."

Mo Ran said, "But he didn't listen to you in the end."

"No, he didn't. We had a big fight over it. He said how can Shizun just sit there all day with his eyes closed trying to ascend while the common people suffer right in front of his eyes."

"Ah!" Shi Mei exclaimed in surprise.

Such words toward Huaizui would have been extremely harsh coming from anyone else, but for it to come from Chu Wanning, his own disciple at the time, was shockingly improper.

Huaizui's expression was even, but there was a hint of melancholy there. "This humble monk's control over his emotions was yet lacking back then, and, in a fit of anger, said to his disciple, you can't even save yourself, how can you save others?"

"And what did Shizun say?" Shi Mei asked.

"If you don't know how to save others, how will you save yourself?"

The entire hall fell silent at these words.

Because these words came not from Huaizui, but were whispered by Mo Ran. Suddenly hearing him say the same thing that Chu Wanning had said back then, Master Huaizui's eyes glinted in the light as he gazed silently at the young man before him, and a long moment passed before he let out a deep sigh.

"Is that how he'd been teaching you? He... aye, he really... hadn't changed at all, still that same unwavering conviction in his path."

Huaizui's thoughts were a mess; Mo Ran wasn't any calmer.

He had always scoffed at that line of Chu Wanning's, thinking it to be fake righteousness and empty words. But saying it just now, he instead felt anguish like his heart was being engulfed by flames.

Several moments passed before Huaizui's hollow voice sounded once again inside Loyalty Hall.

"It shames me to say this, but I lost my temper that day and told him that if he insists on being stubborn and takes one step out of the temple gates, then we would be master and disciple no more, all ties severed," he paused, as if choked up by that piece of the past, wanting to talk about it in detail yet also not wanting to. After several moments of hesitation, he shook his head.

"As I'm sure you've guessed, Chu Wanning chose to cut ties and leave in the end. It's been many years since then. He and I want different things; so though we both live in this mortal world, our paths have never crossed since."

Shi Mei said, "That's not Shi...that's not the great master's fault."

Huaizui replied, "Right and wrong, truth and falsehood, these are not things so easily grasped. But Chu Wanning was once my disciple, and this humble monk could find no rest since hearing of his death in that bloody battle. Thus I thought to come here and do what I can, try our luck, see if we can bring back Chu-zongshi——"

Clang.

The vermillion-painted doors were forcefully flung open.

Xue Meng stood on the outside, when he'd arrived nobody knew, but he had clearly already heard the most important parts. He was only told that Master Huaizui was here, but had no idea what the old monk came here for, so he wandered over in no hurry, sipping dejectedly at his bowl of herbal medicine as he walked.

Now, after hearing what Huaizui had said, the bowl had been shattered into pieces on the floor, and the hot medicinal brew had splashed all over him.

But the son of the phoenix didn't seem to feel the burn at all as he cried, "Bring back? *Bring back*? Shizun can——can come back?!"

He stumbled into the room in a run and grabbed Huaizui unceremoniously. "Bald donkey, what did you just say? Is this some kind of joke?"

Shi Mei said hurriedly, "Young master, this is..."

"No... that was unbecoming of me," although he didn't know that the person before him was Chu Wanning's master, Xue Meng remembered that he was here to save Shizun's life and hurriedly let go. "Great master, as long as you can bring Shizun back, if there's ever anything you need in the future, Xue Meng will definitely go through hell and high water, risk life and limb for you. Just please... please say it's no jest."

Huaizui said, "Xue-shizhu, there's no need for that. This humble monk came calling this late at night specifically for your Shizun."

He turned to look out the window at the night sky, "It's almost time. Since the three young shizhu are all here, please allow this humble monk to explain to you the details and challenges of the Rebirth Technique."

Shi Mei said, "Please do, great master."

But Xue Meng pressed urgently, "What even is there to say! Save him first! Hurry and save him first!"

Huaizui replied, "Xue-shizhu is understandably anxious, but please know that any mistake could cost not only the shizhu's life, but could also scatter Chu Wanning's soul. If that were to happen, he won't even be able to enter the Wheel of Reincarnation^[10] anymore. Would you chance that?"

"I..." Xue Meng's face flushed red immediately and his hands closed tightly around his sleeves, only loosening after a long while. "Alright, I'll listen to the great master's explanation..."

Huaizui took out three plain white silk lanterns from his storage pouch. The white silk of the lanterns were intricately woven with thin threads of gold, and complex spell patterns were embroidered into their centers in thirteen colors of silk threads, circling and interlacing like a spider web meant to capture departing souls.

"These are Soul-Calling Lanterns," Master Huaizui distributed the three lanterns to the three of them. "Take these, and listen very carefully to what this humble monk is about to say next."

Mo Ran took the lantern and held it carefully in his hands.

"Each person has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits^[11]. The three ethereal souls are the Earth Soul, the Cognizance Soul, and the Human Soul. After death, the three souls leave the body and each go their own way. All of this you already know, but I hazard a guess that you don't know where exactly each soul goes after death."

Shi Mei spoke, "May the great master please enlighten us."

"The Earth Soul and the Human Soul proceed to the Underworld, while the Cognizance Soul remains within the body. It is said that the soul returns on the seventh day, but in actuality, it is only the Human Soul that returns to the world of

the living to meet with the Cognizance Soul. The Human Soul generally returns due to some unfulfilled wish; once its wish is realized, it will merge with the Cognizance Soul within the body, and the merged soul will go to the Underworld to reunite into a complete soul and await reincarnation. Many have attempted Rebirth without full knowledge of its intricacies, only to end up calling back only an incomplete portion of the soul, which naturally dissipates in short order.”

After Shi Mei’s death in the past life, Mo Ran had also tried to call back his soul. But, just as Huaizui said, under the pale white moonlight, there was no more than a very faint shadow of that person, which turned instantly into glitters of light.

Mo Ran muttered, “I see...”

Huaizui continued, “Chu Wanning’s Cognizance Soul yet remains in his body, you need not be concerned about it. The important thing is to find his Human Soul and his Earth Soul.”

Xue Meng asked hastily, “Find how?”

Huaizui answered, “Using the Soul-Calling Lantern. This lantern can only be lit using spiritual energy, so you must sustain it with a stream of your spiritual energy and walk through Sisheng Peak with it. If Chu Wanning does not refuse the three shizhu, then the light of the Soul-Calling Lantern will be able to illuminate his Human Soul.”

Mo Ran’s heart dropped at these words. “Then what if Shizun doesn’t want to see us?”

“That’s the first difficulty, and the reason why the chance of success is greater the more people there are willing to look for him. It must be said that, if he has no lingering attachments to this world and has already decided to leave,” Huaizui said, “then the Soul-Calling Lantern will be unable to illuminate him. So as you can see, for the Rebirth Technique to work, everything—time, place, and people—must align just so. If the deceased has no lingering attachments to any of the people who go to search for him, and is unwilling to return to the world of the living, then no one can compel him to come back.”

“.....” Mo Ran’s hands tightened subconsciously around the lantern.

Xue Meng said without pause, “Shizun cared for us the most, how could he be unwilling to come back? Great master, what do we do after finding Shizun’s Human Soul with the lanterns?”

“Once you find the Human Soul, you must then go to a certain place.”

“Where?” Xue Meng asked.

“The Underworld,” Huaizui answered.

All three of them were shocked, not having anticipated actually having to go to the Underworld.

Shi Mei ah’d softly, then lowered those beautiful eyes slightly and asked in a quiet voice, “Um... how would a living person go into Hell?”

“I have my ways, shizhu need not concern himself with that.”

Huaizui shot him a measured gaze and continued, “But of the three of you, no matter who finds Chu Wanning’s Human Soul first, you must wholeheartedly wish for him to return to the living world, and be unreservedly willing to go to the Heavens above and the Underworld below for his sake. If you lack the strength of conviction, then Chu Wanning’s soul will scatter halfway and be impossible to gather ever again.”

Shi Mei: "Um..."

Xue Meng spoke, "The depth of the affection and regard I hold for Shizun are beyond measure. Even if I have to go to the Infinite Hells to find him, I'd have no complaints."

"...Shizun died because of me," Mo Ran lifted his eyes and also affirmed, "I owe him far too much, and also have no complaints."

Huaizui said, "Good. Then listen well: once one of you finds Chu Wanning's Human Soul, he won't be perceivable to the others anymore. And, as for the one to find him, you must make sure to keep the Soul-Calling Lantern lit all the way until daybreak, and keep his soul within its light."

Xue Meng said, "Doesn't sound difficult."

"It's difficult," Huaizui said. "Once the three souls split, each will generally be missing something. It could be hearing, cognition, or memories... simply put, if you're unlucky, the Shizun you meet might not be so willing to listen to you, and you might have to think of ways to coax hm."

Xue Meng: "....."

Mo Ran's felt his heart clench with unease. "...Coax him? But what if...what if we say something wrong? He was already hard enough to guess when alive, now that he's a ghost..."

He was genuinely worried about it, but there had been so much friction between him and Xue Meng for so long that Xue Meng thought he was deriding Chu Wanning, and so turned to glare angrily at him as he snapped, "What's so hard about coaxing someone, just remember to not let Shizun out of the lantern's range."

Shi Mei asked, "What happens after daybreak?"

"After daybreak, Chu Wanning's Human Soul will drift into the Soul-Calling Lantern. This humble monk will be waiting by the bridge with a bamboo raft prepared at that time. This place is located at the entrance to the Ghost Realm, and the waters beneath Naihe Bridge flow directly into the Yellow Springs^[12]. The raft will ferry the one who finds the soul fragment into the Ghost Realm."

Xue Meng: "Going to the Ghost Realm on a bamboo raft?"

Shi Mei asked, "Only one person can go? The others can't help?"

"They cannot. So whoever finds Chu Wanning's Human Soul will have to go alone into the Ghost Realm to look for his Earth Soul as well. If that person were to give up halfway or have second thoughts, then Chu Wanning's Human Soul will be devoured by the Soul-Calling Lantern, never again to reincarnate."

Xue Meng started and almost immediately whipped his head around to Mo Ran to say, "You sit this one out, I don't trust you!"

Mo Ran kept his silence, shouldering his doubts without argument.

Shi Mei tried to ease the situation, saying, "Young master, A-Ran isn't the type to just back out like that, so..."

"So what if he's not?!" Xue Meng snapped. "He's already gotten Shizun killed once, why should I believe he won't do it a second time? He's a god damn scourge!"

Shi Mei said quietly, "The great master is still here, how could you say that."

"And why shouldn't I say it? Am I wrong? How many times did Shizun get hurt because of him! Any time he's around, there's always trouble." The rims of Xue Meng's eyes grew red and his lips quivered as he spoke. Trembling all over, he suddenly lost it and reached out to wrest the Soul-Calling Lantern from Mo Ran's hands. "Give me the lantern, don't bring Shizun any more misfortune."

"....."

"Give it to me!"

Xue Meng swore at him. Mo Ran said nothing in retort. For the first time in his life, he felt that Xue Meng was right.

Be it before the ghost mistress of ceremonies or at the bottom of Jincheng Lake, which of Chu Wanning's injuries wasn't due to him? How many scars did Chu Wanning carry because of him?

A scourge.

Heh...

Yes, that's right.

But even so, even knowing that he had treated Shizun poorly, even knowing that he wasn't worthy to go beg Shizun to return from the Underworld, he still didn't want to let go of the Soul-Calling Lantern in his hands. And so he held on tightly and stubbornly to that pale white lantern as Xue Meng cursed him out and tore at him, standing still with his head lowered even as bloody scratches appeared on the backs of his hands.

In the end, Xue Meng, breathing harshly, finally loosened his grip on him and said with reddened eyes, "Mo Weiyu, just how long do you intend to hurt him for..."

Mo Ran didn't look at him. He kept his head down and stared at that empty lantern, silent.

He was silent for so long that everyone else thought he wasn't going to respond, when he suddenly said, quietly, "I want to bring him home."

His voice was so quiet.

Pushed down low by the weight of shame and guilt.

So quiet that Xue Meng didn't quite catch it at first, and there was a beat before he abruptly realized what it was that Mo Ran had said. He sneered out a "hah".

"You want to bring him home?"

"....." Mo Ran closed his eyes.

Xue Meng spit at him, every syllable torn to pieces between his teeth, "Have you no shame?"

"Young master——"

"Let go of me. Let go!" Xue Meng ripped his sleeve out from Shi Mei's grasp, sorrow and resentment flashing in his eyes as he glared unrelentingly at Mo Ran. His voice was raw as he said, "What right do you have."

Mo Ran's hands seemed to flinch slightly, and his eyelashes dropped even lower.

For an instant, he felt some kind of strange delirium, as if Chu Wanning was still alive, as if, in the next moment, he would say, "Xue Meng, behave."

So it turns out that he had always been protecting him.

It was him who took it all for granted.

Mo Ran didn't know what to say as he held onto that lantern like he was grasping desperately at the last straw.

Head still lowered, he repeated, "I want to bring him home."

"Is that all you know how to say!! You——"

"That's enough, Xue-shizhu."

Master Huaizui finally couldn't bear to watch anymore. He sighed and said, "Since Mo-shizhu is of a mind to go, just let him. If something really does go wrong, we can readjust then, but as of right now, everything is yet uncertain, there is no need for Xue-shizhu to be so aggressive."

Xue Meng's expression was dark; he still wanted to say something, but in the end restrained himself in consideration for Huaizui.

But then his restraint slipped and he growled out.

"If anything happens to Shizun, I'll kill you as sacrifice for him."

Huaizui sighed, "Please settle your grievances some other day. There isn't much time left, the important thing right now is to find the Human Soul."

Mo Ran said, "Great master, please begin."

"The Soul-Calling Lanterns have already been enchanted," seeing Mo Ran immediately make to light up the lantern with spiritual energy, Huaizui lifted a hand to stop him. "Shizhu, one moment."

Xue Meng pressed urgently, "Is there still something else?"

"This humble monk wants to reiterate that, if someone does find Chu Wanning's Human Soul, that person will not be able to back out from going to the Underworld. This humble monk will cast a protection spell on that person, but it will still be extremely dangerous for a living person to go into the land of the dead. One careless move, and you might not be able to return alive," Master Huaizui directed a solemn gaze at each of them in turn.

"The dangers of which I speak are no idle threat. Finding Chu Wanning's Earth Soul in the Underworld might not be too difficult, but the difficult part is having to go into Hell alone and face the unknown. If you're lucky, you'll find the Earth Soul in short order, but if you're unlucky and run into any mishaps, then..."

"We'll die?" Shi Mei asked.

"Death would be the least of it. I'm afraid that if that were to happen, then both Chu Wanning and the shizhu will be annihilated from the cycle of reincarnation."

Huaizui continued, "That's why, if there's any doubt at all in your heart, it'd be best to return me the lantern. No one in this world has to go so far as to die for someone else, there's no shame in valuing your own life. If you're unsure, it's not too late to turn back."

"I'm sure," Xue Meng was the most zealous and hot-blooded to boot, and he exclaimed immediately. "Whoever backs out is a rotten egg," he said as he glared viciously at Mo Ran.

But he didn't really understand Mo Ran, after all. This cousin of his was nothing like him. Maybe it was because of all the humiliation he had suffered as a child, but Mo Ran's love and hate had been ground down into sharp claws; if someone were to hurt him, he would eviscerate them, but if someone were to treat him well, even just a tiny bit of kindness, he would never forget.

Mo Ran shot Xue Meng a sidelong glance before turning his gaze back to Huaizui, "I'm also sure."

Huaizui nodded and said, "Very well. When you get to the Ghost Realm, find his Earth Soul as quickly as possible. Once the Human Soul and the Earth Soul fuse into one inside the Soul-Calling Lantern, it will light up the road back to the living world. After that, this old monk will take care of the rest."

It didn't sound too hard the way he said it, but they all knew that every step of the process was unpredictable and full of dangers. Especially the part in the Underworld; if Chu Wanning's Earth Soul cannot be found, or if it's missing cognition or memories and refuses to fuse, then whoever ends up going down to find him might just get stuck down there.

Thus, before the three of them lit up their Soul-Calling Lanterns, Huaizui asked one last time in a slow, solemn voice.

"Once the lanterns are lit, there's no turning back. This is truly no joking matter, so allow this humble monk to ask one final time: are you absolutely certain? Once you start, there can be no room for regrets."

The three of them answered as one, "No regrets."

"Good... good..." A smile spread slowly across Huaizui's face, half embittered, half gratified. "Chu Wanning, it seems you've been a better shizun than I..."

He silently recited the incantation, and the soul lanterns flickered faintly twice before lighting up. A pair of scarlet flames flared up nearly simultaneously within the lanterns in Xue Meng and Mo Ran's hands, tinging the white silk a vibrant red. A moment later, the lantern in Shi Mei's hands also glowed to life with a faint blue light, the color of water elemental spiritual energy.

"Go."

Huaizui said.

"Success or failure, return or not, all will be decided tonight. If tonight falls through... then... *sigh*..."

Mo Ran thought of all the ways in which Chu Wanning had treated him well when he was alive and felt a dull throbbing pain in his heart. He couldn't bear to hear the rest of what Huaizui might say, so he said, "The great master need not say more. Even if I have to kneel, crawl, or die, I'll definitely bring Shizun back to the world of the living."

As long as he's still willing.

As long as... he's still willing to come back with me.

Three spots of light set out individually from Loyalty Hall, each vanishing into the boundless darkness of night before long.

Author's Notes:

There were a lot of people at the hospital today, I only managed to get home at 6pm, clutches face....

Recently I need to spend one to two hours replying to comments, and it's busy at work, so I really cannot reply to all sometimes, please don't feel that I'm doing a haphazard job, bows.

Additionally, when I'm replying to comments, there are some things I really cannot say, so it's exceptionally hard to reply to those. I just want to nag, even

though my standard of writing is limited, I still don't want to write a sweet and stupidly naive kind of novel, so the process will look a little tough, really sorry hahahaha

Anyway, some truths in this novel are buried very deeply, and some characters are not wearing only one mask--when everyone's thinking, "Oh, this little tyke is finally showing his true face", it could be that what he's showing, is only his second mask. So I hope that you friends can be patient, and wait for every character to wash off the paint on their faces, revealing each of their true features in the end and restoring every truth~

And since it's the end of the year, if I don't reply to comments sometimes, then it's really because I'm too busy T T or I've gotten to writing the key turning points later on in the text, and I'm scared of getting my emotions affected by the comments section, so I won't reply in that sort of scenario as well, please understand! Thank you!

The second thing is that a young miss in the comments section yesterday didn't understand why Dog still liked Shi Mei. It's actually very simple.

Firstly, Shizun's death had nothing to do with Shi Mei.

Secondly, Dog only knows that Shizun treats him well, but doesn't know that Shizun loves him.

Thirdly, regardless of how Shi Mei actually is, Dog has not noticed any change in him as of yet.

If you think about it closely, with his personality, and maintaining the three conditions listed above, would he develop suspicions about his feelings towards Shi Mei? The answer is obviously no.

If this is handled by writing that Dog switched targets and fell in love with Shizun because of Shizun's death, then his character would crumble completely, turning into a character who falls in love with anyone who dies. What is Dog feeling? It's regret and guilt, it's delayed respect and protectiveness, he can be feeling anything, except love at this stage.

To put it another way, his love for Shizun is not awakened because of Shizun's death. If it were like this, wouldn't he love whoever died for him? That, instead, becomes an insult to Shizun.

Dog stubbornly thinks that he likes Shi Mei, before Shi Mei changes in any way, or without any other reference, how can he understand that what he feels towards Shi Mei is not love?

The change brought about by Shizun's death will affect his worldview and his actions from here on out, and will make him see Shizun as the one closest to him, but will not make him think about love. At this moment, he feels that imprisoning Shizun, etc. in the past life was extremely horrific, so he's completely unwilling to associate Shizun with romance and love at this point. To cross boundaries and fantasise about Shizun, or to think about him in a romantic way, the Mo Weiyu at this stage, who doesn't know Shizun's true romantic feelings for him, will only feel that it desecrates Shizun.

Additionally, think about it, Shizun died for him, the truth of their past life is revealed, at this point, what's the greatest shock to this party? It's that he could fucking misunderstand such a good Shizun who treated him with a sincere heart, the main character's mind should rightfully sink into great chaos to the point of a meltdown, where the only things he can think of with any clarity are "how could I have done something like that" "I'm losing my fucking mind" "Shizun treated me with a sincere heart, how could I misunderstand such a good Shizun, it's my fault" "What kind of depraved things did I do in my past life"

He would not, at this point, imagine "Why did Shizun save me? He must like me, be pining after me, love me, that's why he saved me."--No way, if he were thinking like this, then the path his brain takes is really strange, how self-obsessed must he be.

Under the conditions of Shizun having just passed, his shattered worldview, and beating himself up in self-reproach, how could he be so fickle-hearted to think of love, to guess if Shizun loved him, to fantasise, "Shifu died for me, it must be because he had a crush on me"? He will only think, "Shifu died for me, he is the best Shifu, I have let him down."

As for losing interest in Shi Mei, that won't happen too, in this affair Shi Mei has effortlessly stood out of the way of the whirlpool of conflict, no matter how a third person looks at it, Shizun's death in the novel has no direct or indirect link to him. He can be implicated in no way, in other words, no matter how much Mo Ran reflects and regrets, that is between him and Chu Wan Ning, and no third person is involved.

"Because of Shizun's death, Mo Ran suddenly discovered that the one he loves is Shizun, and waves goodbye to Shi Mei"--this.....this is really something == Hahaha, if it were handled this way, the character would be entirely seen through the third person point-of-view, the character no longer himself, but a puppet putting on a show outside of what's going on.

So I know some friends are very angry, but I can't help it either. Respecting readers and comments is important, but respecting the characters is the first thing the person typing the novel should do. QAQ sorry, sorry.

The current Mo Weiyu has all his other perspectives shattered, but the one on love has yet to suffer a blow.

This is my best effort at writing from Mo Weiyu's point of view, and his resulting actions. This explanation might not satisfy everyone, but...what needs to be explained should be explained, picks nose.

Patience! Patience! Patience!

This novel is full of slaps to the face!

How many of you were shipping Huaizui and Shizun yesterday? Got slapped didn't you hahahaha. Huaizui is the pitiful character whose true motivations are easiest to guess and whose true face is hinted at most quickly in the whole novel, and in that row in the main and side characters box, everyone has more than one card hidden up their sleeves, waiting to be played hahahahaha okay I've nagged enough.....thank you for reading Auntie's nagging, silently sneaking away to continue typing chapters to queue.

Ch.104 Shizun's Wontons

A single lantern wandered through Sisheng Peak, looking for that fragment of returned soul.

Once the Soul-Calling Lantern was lit, Mo Ran became invisible to the living. It was as if he had also turned into half a ghost, as he climbed the bluestone steps and traversed the stoas and balconies, searching.

Red Lotus Pavilion, Frostsky Hall, Three-Lives Platform...

He had looked everywhere, but he couldn't find him.

Mo Ran couldn't help thinking that maybe Shizun had already grown weary in life, and no longer wished to see him in death.

The thought made his blood run cold. His footsteps picked up, the hem of his robes sweeping past the wild grass underfoot when suddenly he noticed a person standing at the end of Naihe Bridge, cold and aloof, woeful and forlorn. The palms of his hands immediately began to sweat, and his heartbeats were loud like a drum in his ears as he ran toward that person.

“Shizun——”

But the face that turned around belonged to a soul he didn’t recognize, probably a disciple that had perished during the Heavenly Rift that day. The half of his face that was visible was covered in blood, and the eyes that stared at Mo Ran were dull and confused.

“...Sorry, wrong person,” Mo Ran stammered and hurried past him. That soul had lost its cognition, only stiffly watching Mo Ran pass by in front of him without making a single move. The corpse-pale body stood frozen in place, like a shell that had been shed and left behind in this world.

Mo Ran felt his chest tighten even more.

What should he do if Shizun’s Human Soul was also like that, a walking corpse? Even if he were to find him, would he be able to watch over him until daybreak?

His heart beat like a frenzied stampede as his feet moved faster and faster.

He didn’t know how he ended up here, but he looked up to find himself outside Mengpo Hall.

Mo Ran thought to himself that Shizun didn’t particularly care for food, so his returned soul probably wouldn’t come to this of all places.

He was just about to turn and leave when a soft sigh came from inside Mengpo Hall.

That voice was so, so quiet, but it sounded like an explosion of thunder in Mo Ran’s head.

He practically stumbled through the doors, and his hand shook uncontrollably as he lifted the Soul-Calling Lantern. The light of that lantern was like a newly risen sun, warm yet mild, as it illuminated a white-robed figure.

His joints turned white as his nails dug into his palm.

Mo Ran murmured, “Shizun...”

That fragment of Chu Wanning’s soul stood all alone in the emptiness of the large kitchen. His silhouette looked a little washed out, like ink blached by the passage of time, but it was definitely him.

He wore the same white robes made of frozen mist silk that he had when he died, its hems stained red with blood; the conspicuous vividness made his skin look even paler, almost see-through like the color of smoke and mist, looking as if he might disappear in a gust of wind.

With lantern in hand, Mo Ran gazed at the mirage before his eyes, like the image of flowers in a mirror, like the reflection of the moon in water.

He wanted to walk faster, afraid that he might leave if he delayed.

He wanted to walk slower, afraid that the dream might shatter if he rushed.

A thousand thoughts twisted together in his mind, regret and guilt flooded his chest, and the rims of his eyes grew faintly red. He felt only that he owed him far too much as his footsteps slowed to a stop in his vicinity, too ashamed to show his face.

The lantern swayed gently.

Now that he was closer, he could see that he was busying about, seeming a little anxious about something, but also rather clumsy.

What was Chu Wanning doing?

He moved to stand behind him, thinking to help the pitiful soul out, but what he saw struck him like lightning, and then, as the shock began to taper off, a burst of agonizing pain opened its bloody maw and tore viciously into his neck.

Mo Ran recoiled backward two steps, slowly shaking his head but unable to speak.

In that moment, even if his chest were to be torn open, and his heart ripped out, veins, flesh, and all, it could not hurt as much as this.

He saw Chu Wanning's hands—raw and bloody from crawling up more than three thousand steps carrying him when he was still alive, he saw those hands slowly feeling along the table.

On that table sat flour, seasoning, and mincemeat filling.

And next to the table was a pot heating up water. The water was already boiling, but Chu Wanning, the dummy, didn't even know to lower the flames a little, and the thick covering of steam made everything look hazy and blurry...

Or perhaps it wasn't the steam blurring Mo Ran's vision at all, but the wetness in his eyes.

Chu Wanning's Human Soul was slowly folding wonton wrappers. His hands were originally nimble and dexterous, countless armaments having been crafted by those slender fingers, immense barriers having been conjured between those palms.

But right now those hands were torn and marred, trembling slightly as they carefully folded one full, plump wonton after another.

"....."

Mo Ran lifted an arm and wiped his reddened eyes, but still couldn't force out so much as a single word.

Chu Wanning stood with his back facing him; he seemed to finally remember that the water had been boiling for quite a while already, and, worried that it would all boil off if left alone like that, went to look for the pot.

He felt around with his hands.

Yes, he felt around with his hands.

Mo Ran finally woke up from the anguish he had been drowning in, and went around to Shizun's side with hasty steps.

He could see clearly now.

When the three souls split, each loses something. Maybe memories, maybe cognition, or maybe parts of its body.

What this soul had lost was a part of its perception.

This portion of Chu Wanning's soul, returned from the Underworld, could see only blurriness. His hearing seemed to be faulty as well—when he knocked something off the table, he couldn't even tell where it landed. But even so, he still tried his best to make this bowl of ordinary, unremarkable wontons, as if this had been his favorite thing to do in life, as if he found comfort in this haze of steam.

Watching this, Mo Ran felt like his heart might burst from the pain, felt like the world was spinning dizzily around him, and for a moment he couldn't even think, only standing there frozen in place, watching the scene before his eyes.

Clang.

Due to the diminished vision, the soul really couldn't see too well, and accidentally knocked over Mengpo Hall's salt jar.

Chu Wanning seemed startled, silently drawing his hand back, an uneasy expression appearing on his bloodstained face.

"What do you need...?"

A hoarse voice spoke from next to him, tight with choked back sobs, shattered with guilt.

"Let me help you, okay?"

Chu Wanning seemed a bit surprised, but maybe because his soul was incomplete and so his emotions couldn't be too turbulent, he soon settled back into an even calmness.

But every word Mo Ran forced past his lips was difficult and full of pleading. "Shizun, let me help you, okay...?"

Water boiled in the pot; in this kitchen, the dead was warm and lively, but the living was distraught and listless.

A long while passed before he finally heard Chu Wanning's familiar voice, low and even like the shattering of jade and the crumbling of mountains.

"You're here?"

"...Yes."

"That's good. Just wait at the side for a bit. Once the wontons are done cooking, bring a bowl to Mo Ran."

".....!"

Mo Ran froze, not understanding what Chu Wanning was saying at all.

He watched as Chu Wanning, feeling around blindly, put the plump, snow-white wontons one by one into the pot, his face losing its usual sternness in the haziness of steam, looking very gentle instead. He said, "I punished him too harshly yesterday, he probably hates me now. I heard Xue Meng say he's not eating anything, so when you go to deliver this to him, don't tell him I made it. He won't eat it if he knows."

Mo Ran's head was a complete mess, as if some secret that had been sleeping for half a lifetime was beginning to stir, was just about to break out of the ground.

"Shizun...."

Chu Wanning forced a smile, "I'm afraid I was too strict with him, but that rashness of his really should be tempered... nevermind, get a bowl for me, a thick one if you can. It's cold outside, have to keep the food warm."

Just about to break out of the ground, just about to break out of the ground.

It was as if he could hear the faint sound of something shattering in his mind, and a certain memory finally clawed through its shell, screeching like a ghost as it burst forth and hurtled toward him.

All of a sudden, everything went dark.

Wontons.

Shi Mei.

Shizun.

.....

That was the first time he'd had Shi Mei's wontons. That day, he had mistakenly plucked the precious flower Madam Wang had been growing, and

gotten punished by Chu Wanning for it. Tianwen had whipped him bloody, and turned his heart into ash.

He had lain in bed refusing to get up, brooding that he had plucked the flower because he wanted to give it to Shizun, only to get a round of merciless lashing instead. He thought that he must have been blind to have taken to Chu Wanning, that his heart must have been covered in lard to think that Chu Wanning was gentle, that Chu Wanning cared about him.

That was the day when Shi Mei had come to his room holding a bowl of steamy wontons in chili oil. That soft voice, that gentle tone, and that warm bowl of wontons turned all of his disappointment in Shizun into fondness for Shi Mei.

But who could've known...
But who could've known!!!!

That fragment of returned soul stood there next to him. Every deceased person's Human Soul is different when it returns—some are like Luo Xianxian, coming back to see what happened after their death; some are like that person at Naihe Bridge earlier, without any lingering cares or worries, simply wandering around the place where they lived in a stupor.

Chu Wanning's Human Soul lost its vision, couldn't tell voices apart, and didn't even know which day it was.

He came back to the world of the living probably because he felt that he had done something wrong, made a mistake, and felt bad about it.

Wanted to make up for it.

And so, in the end, Chu Wanning made a decision different from that in life.

He scooped the wontons out and put them in the bowl. The chopped scallions were a jade green, the broth was milky white, and the chili oil poured on top, red and spicy.

He went to hand the bowl over to "Shi Mei", but paused suddenly at the last moment.

"I really was too unkind to him," Chu Wanning murmured.

A few moments passed in silence.

"Nevermind, you don't have to deliver it anymore. I'll go see him myself, and apologize to him."

Mo Ran stared blankly, his face ghostly pale.

He had always thought that Shizun was too cold, cold like iron, so cold it froze his heart into ice. He never would have guessed that Shizun was actually kind to him...

That his lingering regret in the living world was *him*.

—And, to apologize to him.

The ice melted. Turned into water. Became an ocean.

Slowly, Mo Ran lifted his hands and buried his face in them.

His shoulders trembled slightly.

A heart like iron? A heart like iron?

That wasn't it...

Mo Ran's throat felt tight, and a sob escaped as he fell to the ground, kneeling before the soul that couldn't see him. The Soul-Calling Lantern sat on the ground by his feet as he let out a broken wail, screamed himself hoarse as if he might cry blood, and finally, unable to hold it in any longer, he bawled, loudly and miserably.

He knelt before Chu Wanning.

That wasn't it...

He groveled in the dust, clutching at the hems of Chu Wanning's bloodstained robes.

It wasn't that your heart was cold and hard as iron, it wasn't that I was unyielding and immovable as a rock. It was just that I misjudged in the past, misunderstood you too much... it was just that...

"Shizun, Shizun..." He wept, curling in on himself. "I'm sorry, I was wrong, please... please come back with me..."

"Shizun... please come back with me, I was wrong, it was my fault. I don't blame you, I don't hate you, it was my fault, always making you angry, if you hit me or scold me in the future, I definitely won't fight back, Shizun, if you just come back, I'll listen to everything you say... I'll respect you, I'll cherish you, I'll treat you right..."

But Chu Wanning's robes were gossamer-thin, as if it might shatter at any moment in his hands.

Mo Ran wished he could cut open his own chest and give him his heart, just to hear his heartbeat again. He wished he could drain his own blood to fill his veins, just to see color on his face again.

He would do anything to make up for his mistakes.

"Shizun," his voice broke.

"Let's start over from the beginning, okay...?"

In front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower, under that haitang tree.

The zongshi, gentle as a white cat, lifted his head, phoenix eyes widening slightly. The cicadas on the branches chirped two, three times, and the youth before him grinned brightly.

"Xianjun xianjun, I've been watching you for so long already, why won't you pay attention to me?"

In the blink of an eye, it had been twenty years, two lifetimes.
All in the past already.

It was greedy and shameless, but he said it——
Shizun, let's start over from the beginning.
Okay?

Please, pay attention to me, won't you...

Author's Notes

Wonton-Jun has used a special method to come online, congratulations to those who guessed it right~

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Translator Notes



The wontons are [红油抄手](#) spicy wontons/chaoshou in chili oil, a Sichuan dish

Ch.105 Shizun's Human Soul

>>light gore

The lamp cast its bright light on a pair of people.

They weren't at Mengpo Hall anymore, but in Mo Ran's room. Chu Wanning couldn't see the road clearly, so Mo Ran had led him by the hand.

Chu Wanning was short two souls, unable to tell what day it was or even whose hand was holding his, only dazedly allowing the other to lead him along. Mo Ran led him into the room, wiped the tears from his face, and closed the door behind them.

Chu Wanning set down the bowl of wontons he was holding. Then, feeling around, he went to the bed and asked softly:

"Mo Ran is still asleep?"

"....."

There was no response, so Chu Wanning assumed that Mo Ran was indeed still asleep. He sighed, and seemed a little disappointed.

Mo Ran couldn't bear it, and was also afraid he might leave, so he sat on the bed and said, "Shizun, I'm awake."

Hearing him call for himself, Chu Wanning's brows moved slightly and he mn'd, but then seemed hesitant and said nothing else.

Mo Ran knew he had a thin face and would probably try to leave again after just a couple of words if he thought Shi Mei was here, so he picked up a hair clasp from the table and tossed it at the door to make it sound like Shi Mei had closed the door and left, then asked, "Why is Shizun here? Who brought you here?"

Sure enough, Chu Wanning with only half his soul was much easier to fool than usual. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Shi Mingjing took me here. Did he leave?"

"He left."

"Mn..."

A moment passed in silence before Chu Wanning finally said, "The wound on your back..."

"The wound on my back is not Shizun's fault," Mo Ran said in a soft voice. "I picked a precious herb without permission, Shizun's punishment was well-deserved."

Not having expected him to anything like that, Chu Wanning was slightly taken aback, then his delicate, curtain-like lashes quivered minutely as he sighed, "Does it still hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

Chu Wanning lifted his hand, those ice-cold fingertips seeking until they touch Mo Ran's face, and then, a moment later: "Sorry, please don't hate Shizun."

He never would have spoken such soft words back then, but in death, thinking back to things as his soul drifted in the Underworld, he found that he didn't regret anything other than how unkind he had been to his disciple. And so,

given this second chance, these words that were once impossible to say came out so easily.

Mo Ran felt like a warm spring water was streaming over his heart; the hatred that remained after his rebirth, the old scars that refused to fade year after year, the unwillingness to accept things that was already on its last breath, all of it had already been shattered into pieces, and now they were washed away by these heartfelt words of apology, leaving nothing behind.

In the light of the Soul-Calling Lantern, he gazed at his Shizun's face. He couldn't see the bloodstains anymore, and there seemed to be a whisp of life again in the paleness there. It was as if he was peering across all the time that could never turn back and seeing Chu Wanning's gentle countenance from the first time he saw him.

Unconsciously, Mo Ran raised a hand to cover his ice-cold hand with his own warm one.

"I don't hate you," he said. "Shizun, you're good to me. I don't hate you."

Chu Wanning stared blankly for a moment, then suddenly smiled.

Even though he was dead, even with blood and dirt on his face, his smile was still the first melt of a frozen-over stream, filling the entire room with the warmth of spring. His eyes were closed, but there seemed to be something glistening between his lashes. It was the bright, brilliant smile of one whose final wish had been granted, proud yet reserved, radiant yet humble, like the blooming of the most luxuriant and steadfast haitang tree, countless blossoms of gentle, faint blushes carefully dotting the dignified branches, beautiful and sweet-scented, covering the leaves like so many stars.

Mo Ran couldn't help losing himself in the sight...

This was the first time in two lifetimes that he had seen Chu Wanning with such an easy and happy expression. Mo Ran wasn't smart; he thought of the saying "a flower-like smile", but deemed it unfitting, then he thought of "a smile of a hundred charms", but that seemed even more absurd.

He racked his brains but just couldn't think of a way to describe this lovely vision before him.

All he could do was sigh with feeling, *how beautiful*.

Such a beautiful person, how did he...never notice before?

Struck by a sudden, fortuitous inspiration, Mo Ran said in a soft voice, "Shizun, there's something I want to tell you."

"Hm?"

"I really didn't know how valuable Madam Wang's haitang flower was. When I picked it that day, it was because I wanted to give it to you."

Chu Wanning seemed surprised. Mo Ran's voice grew even softer, a little bashful, even a little helpless as he repeated, "It was for... for you."

"But why would you pick that flower for me?"

Mo Ran's face flushed despite himself. "I-I-I don't know either, I just, just thought it was really pretty, I..."

He didn't continue, vaguely surprised to find that he somehow still remembered how he had felt so long ago when picking that flower for Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning without his other two souls was really so gentle, like a cat without its claws, all soft, docile belly and snowy, rounded paws.

He pat Mo Ran's head and smiled as he said, "Dummy."

"...Mn," Mo Ran's eyes stung as he gazed up at him. He sniffled, "I'm a dummy."

"Don't do it again."

"I won't do it again."

Mo Ran thought about how, when he gave up hope in the past life, he had gone around doing all manners of evil and terrorizing people, angering Chu Wanning until his Shizun finally gave up on him and tossed him that verdict—"deficient by nature, beyond remedy"—that he had resented for an entire lifetime. A hundred emotions welled up in his chest as he said, "Shizun, I promise you, from now on I won't do anything to disappoint you. I'll be good, I won't be bad."

He was hardly well-read and didn't have any powerfully resounding words of promise to say, but he could feel the hot blood boiling in his chest as that pure and simple soul that he once had as a child finally seemed to stir from its slumber.

"Shizun, this disciple is slow-witted, and didn't realize until now how good you have been to me."

His eyes were bright as he got up from the bed and knelt before Chu Wanning, bowing down low.

And when he lifted his head, the young man's expression was solemn and serious.

"So from now on, Mo Ran won't bring you any disgrace ever again."

Sitting side by side, the master and disciple had a long talk, though Mo Ran did most of the talking. He was actually very cute when he set his mind on cherishing someone. Chu Wanning listened quietly, now and again shaking his head with a smile. Before they knew it, the skies outside the window gradually began to brighten, like the rich darkness of Huizhou ink being watered down.

The long night was coming to an end.

Master Huaizui stood by the stone bridge, the hems of his monk robes wet from splashes of the water rushing past, but he seemed not to notice at all as he waited silently.

The sun rose slowly from the east, its light passing through the leaves of trees to strike the turbulent waters of the Yellow Springs, instantly turning the racing currents a dazzling gold, the water sprays sparkling like the delicate scales of a dragon and light reflecting brilliantly where the flow billowed into waves, glistening and resplendent.

He was currently in the void realm, visible only to the one who finds Chu Wanning's soul. Shi Mei and Xue Meng had both come by already, but neither could see the old monk by the bank. He was calm by all appearances, but his hand thumbing a string of prayer beads unconsciously moved faster and more urgently with each passing moment.

Clatter—

Abruptly, the coils of prayer beads fell apart, the star-moon Bodhi beads dropping like rain all over the ground.

Huaizui's eyes flew open and he pressed his lips together, color draining from his face.

It was an ill omen. He stroked the broken string of the prayer beads, watching the rolling waves toss stray beads back onto the shore, and beads on the shore rolling into the waters... he stared blankly for a long while, face slowly growing paler.

"Great master!"

Someone suddenly called out to him.

“Great master!!!”

Excitedly, exuberantly.

Huaizui looked immediately toward the source of the sound to see Mo Ran sprinting over from the distance, holding a Soul-Calling Lantern that flowed with both a scarlet light and a golden one.

The first rays of dawn were already dazzling enough, but this young man’s eyes were even brighter than the morning sun, gleaming like a pair of crystals. He screeched to a halt in front of Huaizui, cheeks flushed and panting slightly, but uncontrollably excited.

“I found him,” Mo Ran brushed aside his disheveled bangs, that lantern holding Chu Wanning’s Human Soul tucked snugly against his chest. “He wasn’t unwilling to see me, he’s... he’s in here.” He pointed at the lantern in his arm, but then hesitated, wanting to hand it over to Huaizui but also loathe to part with it, his hands extending out only a couple of inches before drawing back in again.

Huaizui let out a subtle sigh of relief and looked him up and down, then said with a laugh, “Since you’re the one who found him, you can hold him, no need to give to me.”

So, very carefully, Mo Ran continued holding the lantern.

Huaizui picked up the monk staff leaning against the tree, tapped it lightly against the water, and a jade-green bamboo raft with a white cord tied to its curved bow appeared out of nowhere.

“There’s no time to lose, please board.”

It was common knowledge that Sisheng Peak’s river connected to the Ghost Realm, but since there was a barrier in between, going to the Underworld wasn’t just a simple matter of flowing along the waters.

Master Huaizui’s bamboo raft was enchanted to allow it to pass between the Yin and the Yang, so after half a day and many miles of Mo Ran sitting alone on the raft sailing the currents, he came upon a waterfall.

The waterfall to the Underworld.

This waterfall connected to the infinite cosmos above and the deepest reaches of Hell below, with no defined boundaries and neither beginning nor end. The watery curtain came down in a great cascade, the spray of droplets giving rise to a foggy mist.

Before Mo Ran could even get a closer look, the bamboo raft was already carrying him straight toward that enormous curtain of water the size of prehistoric beasts. He didn’t even have time to react when powerful streams of water were already immediate, like countless blades poised to tear right through flesh and bone!

“SHIZUN——!”

In the midst of danger, the only thing Mo Ran cared only was the Soul-Calling Lantern in his arms. He held the lantern tightly against himself to shield it, never once letting go even as he was drawn into a raging whirlpool and everything was dark stormy chaos...

He didn’t know how long had passed when the deafening sound of the waterfall abruptly vanished.

And the barrage of knives-like deluge disappeared as well.

Mo Ran opened his eyes slowly, only letting out a breath of relief when he checked that the Soul-Calling Lantern was safe and sound. But then he looked up and was stunned speechless by the sight before him.

That waterfall traversing the realms of Yin and Yan was nowhere to be seen, and the bamboo raft was drifting gently on a vast lake with tranquil waters. The lake was a deep blue that flowed with specks of starlight, and countless wisps of faint souls swam through its waters like shoals of fish. Reeds flourished along both its shores, with faintly-glowing flowers that drifted to and fro in the draft.

From the left side and the right, in the depths of the reeds, came the singing voices of a man and a woman, the notes wafting as if from a dream, sorrowful yet serene.

“My body into the thunderous abyss, limbs ground into paste. My skull into the open world, eyesockets withered into dust. Scarlet ants devour my heart and vultures my innards... only the soul returns... only the soul returns...”

Green waters of the Yellow Springs flow east, past bygone never to return.

Mo Ran continued drifting on the bamboo raft for a long time, and then, suddenly, a great gateway that towered into the black sky appeared in the heavy darkness of night.

Once closer, he could see that the enormous gateway was grand and majestic, with fine details that were splendid and exquisite. It was like a vile beast of gold and jade, covered in honey and decorated with pearls, that had been crouching in the darkness with its bloody, putrid-smelling maw wide open since time immemorial as untold numbers of lonely souls and lost ghosts wandered into its stomach.

Even closer, the sinister turrets looked like fangs that could pierce the sun, and the whole structure seemed like the imposing head of a massive beast lying in wait for all the grievances of the world.

Even closer, and the piece of Chu Wanning’s soul in the lantern seemed nervous, its golden glow pulsing in brightness and swaying slightly.

“It’s alright,” Mo Ran sensed his unease and hugged the lantern closer, leaning in until his lips were nearly touching the paper to whisper soothing words as he channeled in more of his spiritual energy to keep him company.

“Shizun, don’t be afraid, I’m here.”

The light quivered for a moment, then settled back down.

Lowering his thick lashes, Mo Ran peeked into the lantern and couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. He reached out and caressed the edge of the lantern, then hugged it even closer.

In the pitch black night, the words “Ghost Gate” were writ large and bold, strikingly vivid as if newly written in the fresh blood of the living.

The bamboo raft reached the shore, and Mo Ran set foot on the road to the Underworld, the very ground saturated with the smell of blood.

As he walked on, there were more and more people around him, men and women, old and young, even wailing infants that had died soon after birth, all of them drifting toward the inner reaches of the Underworld.

No matter if they were emperors, generals, or ministers in life with riches and splendors unbound, or commoners and peasants with not a penny to their names, no matter how much money or things they had been buried with.

In this time, in this place, all must travel this final road alone.

Mo Ran followed the swarming crowd of souls to the entrance of the Ghost Realm.

There was a person sitting there fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan, probably a soldier, judging by his clothes. His stomach had been cut open when he died, and his intestines slid out from time to time.

The gatekeeper used the handle of the fan to shove his intestines back in with an air of impatience, then looked up lazily to interrogate the newly deceased soul.

“What’s your name?”

“Sun Erwu.”

“How’d you die?”

“I, I died of old age.”

So the gatekeeper picked up a big stamp and carelessly stamped an Underworld entry pass with “Died of Old Age” before handing it to Sun Erwu. “Don’t lose it or you’ll have to go to Seventeenth Hall to apply for a replacement. You can go. Next.”

Sun Erwu was extremely nervous; to be fair, every newly dead person, regardless of how valiant or knowledgeable in life, would probably be nervous. “A-am I gon’ be put on trial? I’m a darn good person, ain’t never killed no chicken in me life, jus’ wonderin’ if I kin mebbe get a better lot next life, at least have enough money to get me a wifey...”

The old man prattled nervously, on and on without stop.

The gatekeeper quickly grew sick and tired of his babbling, waving a hand as he said, “Trial? That’s still a ways off. There are so many souls here in the Ghost Realm, it’ll take at least eight years to get through the reincarnation queue, if not ten. Just hang around and wait your turn, it’s not much different here than in the living world. Save all that about chickens and wives for the the lord judge when it gets to your turn. Next.”

Sun Erwu was dumbfounded, stammering in a thick accent, “Eight, ten years?”

Not too far away in the line, Mo Ran was shocked as well, “Wha? It takes that long to get judged for reincarnation?”

“Of course. Though it’s another matter altogether for the truly reprehensible ones or the ones that have something weird going on with their souls,” the gatekeeper snickered maliciously at his comment; the snicker made his intestines slip out again, and he had to stuff them back in. “The ones headed for the Eighteen Hells^[13] never have to wait long.”

Mo Ran: “.....”

That dense half-wit Sun Erwu still wanted to ask more, but the gatekeeper’s patience was at an end, waving his hand and saying, “Go on, go on, away with you. Everyone’s waiting to get reincarnated, don’t hold up the line. Next, next.”

So Sun Erwu was driven off by the fanning of his palm-leaf fan.

The next one was a young woman with her pretty face all made-up. She opened her mouth to speak, and the poise and coquetry unique to a certain line of work was evident in her gaze as she said in a soft voice, “My lord, this humble one is called Jin Hua’er^[14], and was beaten to death by a brutish villain...”

The ghosts took their turns; each and every one of them had their own thoughts and manners of death.

All the chaotic portrayals of life were gathered here, and there were few sights more bustling and jumbled than this. But Mo Ran only held the lantern in his arms closer to himself.

He owed his Shizun; he didn't care about anything else.

All he cared about was finding that last remaining piece of his Shizun's soul.

"Name?"

The gatekeeper yawned, then lifted his eyes to look at Mo Ran.

Mo Ran was just about to answer when the gatekeeper suddenly quivered, as if sensing that there was something *off* with this person, and abruptly stood up to stare intently at his face.

"....."

Mo Ran cursed in his mind—he had already died once, who knows if there was something odd about his soul from that; even if not, he was currently holding a piece of someone else's soul in his arms, and that was just as questionable. But there the Ghost Realm had just this one entrance, so there was no other way about it.

He could only brace himself and meet the gatekeeper's gaze directly.

The gatekeeper narrowed his eyes.

Mo Ran feigned a calmness he didn't feel as he gave his name, "Mo Ran."

The gatekeeper said nothing.

Mo Ran's heart thundered like a drum as he forced his expression to remain steady. "I had a qi deviation and died just like that. I'd like an entry pass, please."

Ch.106 Shizun, Where Are You ^[15]

"Died from a qi deviation...?" The gatekeeper repeated his words back slowly, then hmph'd. "You a cultivator?"

"Mn."

"A cultivator and you're already down here at that age? How very unfortunate."

The gatekeeper smirked sardonically. Many ordinary people don't have the foundational aptitude necessary for a good fate, and so when they make fun of cultivators, it's like calling grapes sour when they've never been able to have any. ^[16]

"Y'know, your soul looks kinda off to me. Like it's tainted."

Master Huaizui had put an enchantment on Mo Ran that covers up his living scent and allows him to make contact with souls, so the gatekeeper couldn't see right through him, but something just felt *off*, so he sat himself back down and put one leg over the other, feeling around in a drawer and then extracting a pitch-black ruler.

"Sin-Measuring Ruler," he said smugly, though it wasn't clear what he was so smug about, the ruler wasn't even his, but the less important their position the more they liked to put on airs. The gatekeeper slapped the ruler soundly down on the table and lifted his eyes to stare at Mo Ran. "Stick your hand out, this lordly one is gonna measure your merit in life."

Mo Ran: "....."

His merit in life?

If that gets measured, won't he get sent directly over to King Yanluo to get ground into dust?

But with everyone watching and nowhere to run, he could only exhale as he shifted to hold the Soul-Calling Lantern in one hand, extending the other.

The gatekeeper went to place the ruler against the inside of his wrist, but the very moment it made contact, the ruler started screeching shrilly with globs of blood dripping from its pitch-black body alongside the weeping and wailing of untold thousands.

"I will not rest in death..."

"May you never be allowed to reincarnate!! Mo Weiyu!!!!"

"Dad! MOM!!! YOU SON OF A BITCH WHY!!! WHY!!!!!!!"

"Don't kill me... please don't kill me——"

Mo Ran jerked his hand back, face instantly draining of all color.

The gathered ghosts were all staring at him, the gatekeeper's stare the most unreadable of them all. He stared at Mo Ran with a gaze like that of a fierce beast for a while, then lowered his head to look at the ruler.

The red glow had disappeared from the ruler, and the stream of blood was also gone like it was a mere hallucination, the surface of the table perfectly clean. But a line of letters slowly appeared on the ruler.

Sins beyond redemption, send to level...

Which level of Hell?

Mo Ran had pulled his hand back before the Sin-Measuring Ruler could finish measuring, so it couldn't write the rest.

The gatekeeper grabbed his arm abruptly and violently, eyes locking onto him viciously like a predator that had had nothing to do for far too long finally catching a rare prey. His nostrils flared, and a strange light flickered in his eyes; half his intestines had leaked out but he didn't bother shoving them back in this time.

"Hold still while I retake the measurement."

His face was impatient and greedy, like he was already imagining himself claiming his commendations from Yanluo.

His ghost claw dug into Mo Ran's wrist as he forcibly yanked him over, practically unhinged as he slapped the Sin-Measuring Ruler none-too-gently against his wrist once again.

Catching a ghost meant for the Eighteen Hells would be a great credit to him; he'd get promoted on the spot by at least three tiers, and he'll never have to sit at this gate recording the comings and goings of all these souls ever again.

"A proper measuring this time!"

The Sin-Measuring Ruler lit up again.

And, just like before, blood streamed forth as screams filled the sky.

It was as if all of the people that Mo Ran had ever killed and all of the sins that he had ever committed were being crammed into the small black ruler, almost making it burst with the sheer overwhelming magnitude of the resentment.

"I hate..."

"Mo Weiyu, I'll never let you off, even when I'm dead..."

Mo Ran's expression became more and more distraught, lowering his eyelashes and pressing his lips tightly together, something unreadable in his eyes.

"You have no conscience!!!! You've turned this world into hell!"

"I'll haunt you when I'm dead!"

"AAAAAAAH——!!"

Weeping, wailing, cursing, and hating.

Suddenly, amidst all those voices, he heard a soft sigh.

"I'm sorry, Mo Ran. It was this master's fault..."

Mo Ran's eyes flew open, eyes full of grief and sorrow.

He heard Chu Wanning's voice from when he was on the verge of death in the past life again. It was so gentle, so sad, but it cut into his skull like a knife, almost as if it was going to cleave his soul apart.

The voices slowly faded away. The Sin-Measuring Ruler grew silent.

The line of writing appeared again:

Sins beyond redemption, send to level...

Mo Ran didn't pull away early this time, but the writing still didn't finish!

The gatekeeper blinked, then tapped the black ruler a couple of times. "Is it broken?"

The ruler quivered a little from the taps; then, unexpectedly, the writing disappeared, and a thin layer of celestial haze rose from the surface of the ruler as it glowed with a brilliant radiance.

There was no wailing or weeping from the ruler this time; instead came music like melodious birdsong drifting between the clouds, as if the most elegant chords of the Ninth Heaven had descended into the Underworld. The souls were all entranced by it, and even the gatekeeper couldn't help becoming mesmerized.

Only when the celestial music came to a stop did the gatekeeper finally snap out of it.

And when he checked again, the Sin-Measuring Ruler showed the words

——

Everything normal, allow to pass.

The gatekeeper cried out, "Impossible!"

Wasn't it just "sins beyond redemption" a moment ago? Why was it "everything normal" now?

Refusing to believe it, he used the ruler to check several more times, but it was the same result every time: sounds of screaming at first, followed by beautiful music, and finally, without exception, it would say everything normal, allow to pass.

The gatekeeper was beyond disappointed, but he had no basis for blocking a normal soul from entering the Underworld.

He shoved his intestines spitefully back in his guts as he muttered, "Tch, that's *some* qi deviation you had, alright."

Mo Ran was just as surprised. He had no idea why this was happening either, but thinking about it, he concluded that Master Huaizui's enchantment must have confused the ruler, and so let out a breath of relief.

"Take your damn entry pass and get lost then, you waste of time. Beat it!"

"....." Mo Ran couldn't be happier to oblige, and was just about to leave with the Soul-Calling Lantern in his arms when the gatekeeper's eyes suddenly lit up and he shouted loudly——

"Hang on!"

Mo Ran kept his expression steady even as his heart raced, feigning an impatient annoyance as he replied, "What is it *now*?"

The gatekeeper gestured with his chin, "What's that you're holding?"

"Oh, this..." Mo Ran's hand stroked the lantern as the gears in his head turned rapidly. He turned around with a smile, "It's my burial item^[17]."

"Burial item?"

"Yeah, it's a magical relic."

"Heh, how interesting," the gatekeeper pointed at the table, eyes flickering. "Put it down over here and redo the measurement. Your magical relic was probably interfering with the ruler."

"....."

Mo Ran cursed this asshole in his head, but had no choice other than to set the lantern down and apprehensively stick his wrist back out.

The gatekeeper seemed quite confident this time as he eagerly put the ruler into place once more.

.....

But the result was still the same.

Still that same line, clear as day: Everything normal, allow to pass.

Let alone the gatekeeper, even Mo Ran hadn't the slightest. But with that, the gatekeeper finally gave up for good and lazily waved him in.

Not daring to linger even a moment, Mo Ran picked the Soul-Calling Lantern back up and, hugging it to himself, walked through the lengthy passageway to the end, where the quality of the light changed.

The Ghost Realm unfolded before his eyes.

This was the first level of Hell, stretching into the distance with no end in sight. The sky was scarlet like a sunset on fire, and all kinds of strange flora sprouted from the ground. Rows of uneven roof tiles sprawled the immediate area, while palatial structures lined the horizon. A monolith stood at the entrance, and on it was written "Thy flesh returns to dust, thy soul to Nanke Town." A red-painted gateway towered next to it, "Nanke Town" carved and gilded with liquid gold upon it, each character the height of a grown man.

So the first level of Hell was called Nanke Town. All of the deceased—assuming there was nothing out of the ordinary with them—would stay here for the eight, ten years until summoned by the judge of the Underworld to the second level to stand trial and receive judgement.

Mo Ran looked around as he walked, holding the Soul-Calling Lantern in his arms.

As far as he could see, the layout wasn't much different from a regular town in the living world—roads, residences, and shops; eighteen streets in total, nine north-south and nine east-west. The souls of men, women, and children went their ways, some laughing, others weeping, truly a gathering of ghosts.

He heard a newly deceased woman sobbing from the east side, "What do I do, what do I do, they're all saying that a remarried woman will be cut in half to be given to the two men, is it true? Can anyone tell me if it's true?"

Next to her, a girl with disheveled clothes and messy hair wiped at her tears, "I didn't want to do that line of work, but there was really no other way to make a living. When I was still alive, I went to a local temple to donate a threshold to be stepped on by people coming and going as atonement for my sins, but the village chief said he'll only allow me to swap out the threshold if I pay him four hundred gold... if I had that kind of money, I wouldn't have had to sell my body in the first place..."

And over on the west side, a guy was counting, "Four hundred and one days, four hundred and two days, four hundred and three days... we agreed to die together for love, but I've been down here for four hundred and four days already and she still hasn't followed. *Sigh*, she's so delicate, maybe she got lost on the way down? What will I do if she really did get lost?"

There was a gathering of newly deceased ghosts at Nanke Town's gate, crying and muttering, lingering and unresigned.

But further in were the older ghosts that had already been back to the living world and resigned themselves to things.

They were much more calm and collected, and each had some kind of livelihood to pass the time while they await trial.

By the third street, things were as busy and bustling as any market in the living world.

After all, these were all soul not yet severed from their mortal lives, who had not yet drank Mengpo's soup and were still indistinguishable between human and ghost. Those who were entertainers in life were still putting on performances at the sides of the streets; those who were seamstresses in life were still taking the clouds of Hell and weaving clothes from them; butchers dared not kill any more, but they could at least do things like sharpening knives and scissors.

Sounds of peddling and of cheering rose and fell, lively and energetic.

Mo Ran stopped in front of a ghost that was selling calligraphy and painting. The ghost was stick-thin and sickly looking, with jutting cheekbones and a sunken-in stomach—probably didn't manage to sell a single painting in life and literally starved to death.

Seeing someone sit down at his booth, the skinny scholar looked up with bleary eyes, but his expression did not lack for passion, "Gongzi, looking to buy a painting?"

"I want you to draw me a portrait."

The scholar seemed woeful, "Paintings of people can hardly compare to the artistry of landscape sceneries, take a look at this painting of Taishan Mountain draped in misty clouds..."

Mo Ran said, "I don't care for landscape paintings. I just need you to draw someone for me."

"Don't care for landscapes huh?" The scholar shot him two glances, displeased. "It is said that the kind know to appreciate the mountains, and the

wise know to cherish the waters; Gongzi is still so young, you really ought to learn some culture, smell some ink. I didn't even want to part with my Taishan Mountain painting, actually, but since you had the taste to stop at my booth, surely you also have some sense to go with it. How about, just for you, I'll cut the price to——”

“I want you to draw a person.”

Scholar: “.....”

They had a stare down; of course the scholar was no match for him and fizzled out in no time, but then he got so mad that even that dead ghost face of his seemed to redden some.

“I don't draw people. It's ten times the price if you really want it.”

Mo Ran wondered, “Things cost money even in the Ghost Realm?”

“Paper money burned by friends and family, yes,” the scholar replied coldly. “Money makes the world go round; though I am disdainful of riches, a gentleman earns his money through proper work. We are neither family nor friends, nor do we have a relationship like that of Boya and Ziqi^[18], so why would I do things for you without cause?”

He rambled on and on, and it was all really too much for Mo Ran's very limited book knowledge. He could only frown and say, “I just got here, no one's burned any money for me yet.”

The scholar said, “No money, no deal.”

Mo Ran thought it over for a moment and came up with something. He pointed at the Taishan Mountain painting and said, “Alright, no deal then. But I'm bored with nothing to do, so could you tell me about landscape paintings?”

The scholar paused, then all of his anger turned into delight instead, “You're interested to know?”

Mo Ran nodded, “Does it cost anything to learn some knowledge from you?”

“Nope,” the scholar was quite conceited, his face lighting up in a way that was both laughable and pitiful. “Knowledge is free, money would only dirty it. Scholarly matters mustn't be tainted by such material things.”

Mo Ran nodded again as he thought to himself, *ah, so that's how the little bookworm starved to death*. It was kind of comical, but also a bit pitiful. Unfortunately, he truly did not have any money right now, or else he really would give him some silver.

The scholar took the painting from its frame all excitedly, put on a pompous posture, cleared his ghost throat that didn't even need clearing, and then, anxiously and snobbishly, said, “I'm going to start.”

Watching the little bookworm take the bait, Mo Ran said with a smile, “Please do enlighten me.”

Author's Notes:

This chapter has many settings and quotes, I pay my respects to the young, middle-class Mr. Lu Xun, who is a tsundere and loves to complain. The original forms of the female ghost and scholar ghost, as well as some of the quotes,

come from *Xianglin's Wife* and *Kong Yiji*, stated here to avoid any misunderstandings.

Ch.107 Shizun's Portrait

Once the scholar got going, he went on for four whole hours, prattling incoherently and ceaselessly, all Confucius and Mencius and over Mo Ran's head. It made Mo Ran's head spin and his eyelids grow heavy, but he still had to feign interest—hard work, to be sure.

When it came to faking attentiveness in lessons, Mo Ran was quite skilled.

Start with a “oh?” paired with furrowed brows, as if not quite comprehending or convinced.

Let them talk for a bit, then go “oh...” and relax the brows a bit to give off the impression of slowly beginning to understand.

Then it's important to remember to open your eyes wide and make them sparkle, and go “ohhh~” to let them know that you've gained new insight and understanding thanks to their brilliant guidance.

He had applied these three “oh”s liberally in Chu Wanning's lessons.

But Chu Wanning never fell for it, always only looked at him coldly and told him to shut up.

But the little bookworm had certainly never received such “courteous” treatment before, and his eyes were practically glowing by the end of it. He was so exceedingly delighted that he only wished he had met Mo Ran earlier, and all of his earlier reservations and haughtiness vanished into thin air.

“I understand now,” Mo Ran said with a smile. “Looking at this landscape painting again after listening to your talk, I can see that it's truly invaluable, beyond what money can buy.”

If the little bookworm was still alive, he'd definitely be red by now, but other than the flush, he was excited in all the other ways, so delighted that he hardly even knew what to do with his hands and where to put his legs, only beaming like a little kid, skinny face all lit up.

Mo Ran had never seen such a happy ghost before.

That should do, then. He got up and made a gesture of respect as he spoke, “It's getting late, I'm going to go look around a bit more and find some place to stay. I'll come again tomorrow, if the professor isn't too busy.”

Suddenly getting called “professor” out of the blue, the scholar beamed even brighter, half freaked out and half ecstatic as he disclaimed, “Nonono, I'm hardly a professor. I took the exam several times, but didn't even pass the county level one to qualify as a Xiucal^[19] in the end, I... *sigh*...”

Mo Ran said with a smile, “The depth of one's knowledge is measured not by titles and ranks, but by what's in the heart.”

The scholar was shocked, “To... to think you were actually capable of such eloquence.”

“It's something my Shizun said once, I'm just lending his words.”

Scholar: “...*Borrowing* his words.”

"Oh, is that how it went? Hahahaha," Mo Ran laughed and scratched his head. "I remembered it wrong again."

Seeing as how it was getting rather late and there probably won't be anyone else coming by for paintings, the scholar started putting away his boxes and pouches, saying, "I'm pretty free myself, and it's not every day I hit it off so well with someone. Though the saying goes that friendship between gentlemen is light as water^[20], it is also said that when meeting friends over wine, a thousand cups is too few, so I say..."

Mo Ran hurriedly cut him off with a smile before he could spew even more scholarly ink, "Were you gonna say something like, it's getting late, how about we go for a drink somewhere?"

"Ah, yes, that's right, some wine to lift the spirits, how about it?"

"Sounds good," Mo Ran nodded. "Professor's treat."

Scholar: "....."

The greasy little table had a small plate of about a dozen-odd scattered peanuts on it and two cups of wine that were barely even half full. There was only a single dingy candle lit in the entire tavern, and the sly-looking boss of the place was wiping a cracked bowl behind the counter.

"The place is a bit shabby," the scholar seemed a little uneasy. "But I never really got any paper money, and I've only been to a couple of places, this one's the most passable of the lot..."

"It's fine," Mo Ran picked up the cup and looked it over carefully. "Do ghosts still eat?"

"It's all fake, works like offerings," the scholar popped a couple of peanuts in his mouth, but none of the peanuts disappeared. He explained, "See, basically like this. Just for a taste."

Mo Ran calmly put down the cup of wine he was holding; he wasn't actually dead, he'll get busted if he eats something.

Three rounds of wine later, the scholar seemed to cheer up a bit from his despondent mood earlier. He chatted with Mo Ran for a while, then asked, "Mo-gongzi wanted me to draw a portrait of someone earlier, is it a lover?"

Mo Ran hurriedly waved a hand, "No no, it's my Shizun."

"Ah," the scholar seemed surprised. "I've been doing my business down here for many years already, and people have come to me looking for paintings of beauties, but I've never had anyone ask me to draw their shizun. Is your Shizun good to you?"

Weighted with guilt, Mo Ran said, "Yes, he's very good to me."

"No wonder, then," the scholar nodded. "What do you want a drawing of him for?"

"To find him."

The scholar ah'd, looking surprised, "He's in the Underworld too?"

"Mn," Mo Ran replied. "I heard that the deceased stay here at Nanke Village for eight to ten years. I'm worried about him, so I wanted to try looking for him to keep him company."

The scholar didn't doubt him in the least, and was even rather moved. He mulled it over for a moment, then finally sighed, "Such devotion is hard to come by... alright! Mo-gongzi, I'll do you this favor!" He got up and opened his box to take out his drawing tools even as he spoke.

Mo Ran was overjoyed, thanking him over and over and asking for his name, thinking to burn this poor bro lots of money once he gets back to the living world.

The two of them gushed back and forth emotionally while spreading out the paper and grinding the ink.

But then it all screeched to a halt as soon as they set to work.

"My Shizun... he uh..." Mo Ran clenched his hand into a fist and tapped it against his knee several times, but didn't manage to tap out any inspiration whatsoever. He hesitated for a long while, straining through his pitiful bank of vocabulary, then finally managed to squeeze out, "He's beautiful. Please draw him."

The scholar stared at him.

Mo Ran: "Well? Draw."

"...Beautiful in what way?"

"Isn't it obvious? Just, beautiful, you know. So draw him beautiful."

"I know, draw him beautiful, but... you know what, nevermind. What kind of face does he have?"

"What kind of face?" Mo Ran stared blankly. "...A face is a face."

The scholar was beginning to get irked, "Oval heart square round, at least give me something?"

"I don't know these things! Anyway, he has a handsome face."

Scholar: "....."

Mo Ran: "Forget it, if you don't know then just draw it like my face, our face shapes are pretty similar anyway."

Scholar: "....."

Next were the eyes.

"What kind of eyes?"

Mo Ran was about to open his mouth, but the scholar stopped him to add. "Do *not* say eyes are eyes."

Mo Ran waved his hand, "I know I know, his eyes look... hm, how to say? Scary but... charming? And cold but gentle."

The scholar threw his brush and declared in a rage, "I quit! You can go find someone else!"

"No wait!" Mo Ran grabbed him hastily. "No one else draws as well as you do!"

The scholar tried to hold down his anger as he glared at him, but there was only sincerity on Mo Ran's face, so he relented and said, stiffly, "Then you have to give me proper answers."

Mo Ran felt a little wronged, he thought his answer just now was perfectly fine? How was it not a proper answer? But beggars can't be choosers, so he could only nod obediently while hugging the Soul-Calling Lantern closer to himself.

The scholar said, "So, the eyes. Leopard eyes? Round eyes? Almond eyes? Phoenix eyes? Or..."

Mo Ran's head spun from all the terms being thrown at him. He shook his head, "Slit eyes^[21]? No that's way too small, his eyes are upturned, I don't know what they're called, but they uh... they swoop upwards, really prettily..."

"That's what phoenix eyes are."

Mo Ran opened his mouth, but seeing the thundercloud on the scholar's face, closed it again. "Alright, slit eyes then, whatever you say."

The scholar continued the questioning, "Nose, high or flat?"

"High."

"Lips, thin or full?"

"Thin."

"Eyebrows, dense or sparse?"

"Dense."

"Thick or thin?"

"Average I think... oh, this one I know, he has sword-straight brows."

"Alright," the scholar put down a couple of brush strokes, then asked, "Any birthmarks on his face?"

Mo Ran tilted his head as he thought, and then his reddened as he mumbled, "Yeah..."

"Where?"

"On his left ear," Mo Ran said haltingly. "A tiny, light-colored mole, and..."
And he's so very sensitive when kissed there.

The scholar quirked a brow, "And?"

"N..." Mo Ran's head shook like a rattle-drum as his face turned even redder, "nothing."

The scholar shot him a questioning glance, but luckily the light was dim enough in here that he couldn't see how red his face was. He dipped his brush in the ink and asked, "Usual attire?"

"He likes to wear white, with his hair done up with a jade crown, or else in a high ponytail," Mo Ran thought for a moment, then added, "he also wears his hair down sometimes, and when he does, he looks really..."

"Don't say beautiful again!" The scholar was at the end of his rope.

"Okay, handsome then."

Scholar: "....."

After that overly arduous ordeal, the drawing was finally done. Mo Ran blew the ink dry and lifted it to examine, deciding that it wasn't as handsome or beautiful as Chu Wanning, and didn't really look completely like him, but it was passable for his purposes, so he smiled and said, "Many thanks, professor. It's great."

"I've just about drawn Pan An, Fan Li, Xi Zi, and Diao Chan^[22]."

"Hahaha," Mo Ran laughed and said, "after I find Shizun, I'll be sure to thank you again properly."

They drank and chatted for a while longer, then parted ways in front of the tavern, and Mo Ran set off with Chu Wanning's portrait in hand. According to the scholar, there was a place on the fifth street called "Tailwind Hall" that specialized in looking into all kinds of information for the new arrivals of Nanke Village.

That's where he was headed.

Outside Tailwind Hall, a banner depicting a black serpent floated lightly. Mo Ran pushed open the door and walked in, and the sight that greeted him was that of an elongated counter stretching across the main hall. About a dozen ghosts dressed in ochre red robes sat behind the counter, each wearing a wooden mask painted with an enraged face concealing their real face from view. In front of each masked ghost was a long meandering line of deceased people with an assortment of expressions and varied requests.

Hundreds of white wax candles floated in the upper part of the building, casting overlapping lights on the overlapping dead. The place was very busy, ghosts coming and going without stop.

"Sir, can you help me look into where my younger brother is? His name is Zhang Bayi, from Gusu, twenty-one years old when he died..."

"You have a portrait?"

"N-no."

"That's fine, but it'll cost you ten times as much."

"Lad——"

The masked ghost cleared her throat, voice clear and crisp.

"Ah, sorry, dinnae know you was a miss. Missy, it's like this, so, when I died, that wifey of mine said she definitely won' remarry, but I been seeing her and me lil' bro makin' eyes at one another for a while now, n' I just really can't accept that, so can you help me check and see if she's actually bein' a proper widow up there or if she done ran off with me lil' bro!"

"Here's the list of prices for looking into matters in the living world, please take a look."

"Excuse me—I liked a girl when I was alive, but she was from a wealthy family, so there was no way she'd even look at some poor scholar who couldn't even pass the imperial exam like me, and I didn't have the guts to confess to her either. She got married eventually; I was happy for her at first, but it turned out that the guy was already married... *sigh*, there was an accident, and she... passed on before me. I want to ask about two things; the first is her current whereabouts, and the second is... if we will be fated in our next life..."

"We can certainly look into things in the next life. However, the cost will not be money, but years of your lifespan from your next life. As for the lady's whereabouts, please provide me her name and portrait."

"Oh, okay, okay. I have her portrait, here. Her surname is Yao, given name Lan..."

There were ghosts chattering away at every counter; though their bodies had long rotted away, they still could not put down their worldly attachments.

Mo Ran walked around the place, hugging his lantern and looking left and right. He noted that in exchange for answers, the people of Tailwind Hall would take either money or years of lifespan in payment.

He didn't have money, but if he were to let them take from his lifespan, they might find out that he was a living person who had infiltrated the Underworld. His apprehension grew, and he couldn't help but curse Master Huaizui for not thinking ahead and giving him some paper money for a situation just like this.

But taking a look at the price list, the cost of inquiring after someone didn't seem particularly expensive. Mo Ran made up his mind and ran back towards the tavern. It took some searching before he found the scholar again, and all his persuasive power to talk him into lending some meager few silvers, and then Mo Ran returned to Tailwind Hall.

He waited in line for a long while before it was finally his turn.

Mo Ran said urgently, "I'm looking for someone. Here's his portrait."

He handed Chu Wanning's portrait over. He was about to say more when, unexpectedly, the person only took one glance at the portrait before chuckling and folding the painting scroll back up. He said, "Why are you looking for him?"

"Ah?" Mo Ran was taken aback. "You can tell where he is just by looking at the painting?"

"Of course. But first, tell me, why are you looking for him?"

"He's someone I know."

The other person shot him another look and then said, "Wait here a moment." He then leaned over and had a whispered discussion with the colleague next to him. When he turned back to Mo Ran, his tone had warmed up considerably.

"Since you're Sir Chu's acquaintance, payment won't be necessary." The person rose to his feet and waved Mo Ran forward. "Come on then, follow me upstairs."

Author's Notes

The three at the beginning originate from their respective Weibo texts and shorts, and are not original. But because they're used so often, when I wanted to look for the sources, I couldn't find them.....the earliest appears to have appeared on the Spring Night skit? Shocked, does it have such local festiveness? Stated here to avoid misunderstandings QAQ

Ch.108 Shizun's Earth Soul

Mo Ran followed him upstairs without any idea what's going on, the worn-out wooden stairs beneath his feet creaking with every step. He couldn't resist asking, "You call him Sir Chu?"

"That's right, Lord Yanluo himself sent him to manage this place, he's our superior."

“.....”

Mo Ran was surprised, but said nothing about it.

“Here we are,” the masked person stopped in front of a half-moon shaped door on the second floor, and knocked lightly on the carved vermillion door that wasn’t completely closed. “Sir Chu, there’s an acquaintance of yours looking for you.”

There was a beat of silence, then a voice came from the inside, gentle like warm wine on the stove, soft hair by the pillow.

“An acquaintance? Him again? I’ve already said that I don’t want to see him ever again. You can tell him to leave.”

The masked person cleared his throat and said, “No, Sir Chu misunderstood, it’s not him this time.”

“But who else is there?” A moment of silence, and then. “No matter, come in.”

The room was simple and elegant, and the furnishings were so plain that it seemed a little bare, but the floor was covered by a soft, luxurious rug. Mo Ran’s foot sunk into the rug when he stepped inside, and there was a whiff of the sharp smell of furs in the air. Completely at odds with the smell was the person currently standing by the window, pruning a flower branch.

His long, inky black hair draped loosely down his white robes and sweeping sleeves, and the vividly-red flower buds quivered lightly where they were held between his delicate fingertips. Maybe it was the rule here at Tailwind Hall, but he also wore a dark blue mask with bared fangs and bulging eyes. Yet, worn on his face, even such a ferocious-looking mask somehow managed to look gentler.

He trimmed off the excess branches, gathered them up and discarded them, before finally turning around.

Mo Ran’s throat felt dry. The exchange between the masked person and Chu Wanning just now left him at a complete loss and feeling vaguely uneasy. He didn’t know what it was that this soul had lost; if Chu Wanning didn’t remember him...

Just as he was fretting, the man put down the pruning shears and walked toward him.

Mo Ran, he who was undaunted by the heavens and the earth, found himself flustered and agitated, sweat covering his back.

“Shizun.”

The man stopped walking, coming to a stop close by. Mo Ran heard something like a chuckle from him.

“Shizun?” he said. “Perhaps the little gongzi got the wrong person?”

As he thought...

Just what he was afraid of.

Mo Ran’s heart dropped like an enormous rock into an endless abyss, dragging him all the way down. He stared at the man before him at a complete loss for what to say.

Seeing no response from him, the person placed his pale, slender hand over the boldly painted mask and took it off, revealing an elegant and composed face beneath.

Mo Ran felt that thousand-pound rock disappear in an instant.

He stared at the unmasked man, astonished but without the slightest hint of doubt, and blurted out, "Chu Xun?"

No wonder the person downstairs had mistaken the portrait. Chu Xun and Chu Wanning looked eight-parts alike to start with, except that Chu Xun was gentler and Chu Wanning was colder, but only someone extremely familiar would be able to tell the difference.

Someone like Mo Ran.

The person before him now was indeed the gongzi of Lin'an City that he had seen in that illusion of two hundred years ago, Chu Xun, so he had blurted out his name without thinking.

But the real Chu Xun had never met him before, and he was surprised as he said with a smile, "...You actually do know me?"

Mo Ran hurriedly waved his hand. "No no, I got the wrong person. But I do also know you..." He peered curiously at the other person as he spoke. Chu Xun had died hundreds of years ago, but had still yet to be reborn, seemingly due to the task assigned to him by Yanluo, allowing him to temporarily exist outside of the cycle of reincarnation.

Meeting Chu Wanning's ancestor was the last thing that Mo Ran had expected; he found the experience quite bizarre.

Chu Xun nodded and said, "I see." Then he continued with a smile, "Whom is the little gongzi looking for? Since fate brought you up these stairs, I will help you search. Else who knows how long it might take you to find this person, with the size of Nanke Town and all the millions of ghosts in it."

Mo Ran was originally going to quickly explain things and then go back downstairs to have the divination re-done, but he hadn't expected Chu Xun, as warm-hearted in death as he was in life, to offer to personally help him. He accepted the offer joyfully. "I'd appreciate that, Sir Chu, thank you!"

He handed the portrait over as he spoke.

Chu Xun unfolded it and took a look, then smiled, "No wonder the people downstairs were mistaken, he really does look quite like me. What's his name?"

"Chu Wanning," Mo Ran said. "His name is Chu Wanning."

"His surname is also Chu? ...What a coincidence."

Mo Ran's heart leapt, and he asked, "Could he be related to you?"

"Not sure. You have to go to the Ninth Ghost King to look into things in the living world. I... have a death grudge against the Ninth King, and refuse to beg him any favors, so I know nothing of matters in the living world."

The Ghost King in question was, of course, the one that broke through the barrier at Lin'an and killed his entire family back then. Bringing up an old scar like this, even someone so composed as him couldn't help the complicated expression on his face.

Mo Ran thought he could use this opportunity to confirm the relationship between Chu Wanning and Chu Xun, but unexpectedly ran into this, and could only shake his head. "That's a pity."

Chu Xun smiled a little and said nothing as he went to fetch a gold-plated yin-yang patterned compass from the shelf, then invited Mo Ran to take a seat.

"This thing can tell us where he is?"

"Eight, nine times out of ten."

"What about the remaining one or two times?"

"The energy of some people's souls can be strange sometimes, so there's a possibility it can't be located," Chu Xun explained. "But that's rare, the little gongzi probably isn't that unlucky."

With the divination set up, the little golden needle inside the compass pointed shakily toward the north, but a little while later swiveled to point south, then suddenly east, suddenly west, and in the end settled on spinning round and round.

Chu Xun: "....."

Mo Ran asked cautiously, "So what does that mean?"

"Ahem," Chu Xun cleared his throat, looking a little embarrassed. "The little gongzi... is indeed that unlucky."

Mo Ran: "....."

Truth be told, Mo Ran's always had rather bad luck, so he just *knew* it wouldn't go this smoothly. He sighed and thanked Chu Xun, then made to go back into the sea of people to keep looking for Chu Wanning.

But just then, the compass suddenly stopped spinning madly, its needle pointing shakily in a certain direction as if it wasn't too sure, then a moment later, nudged to the side a little bit more.

Chu Xun hurriedly called, "Little gongzi, hang on."

Mo Ran paused immediately, holding his breath as he stood by the table and stared at the compass. The needle swiveled left and right, refusing to hold still, but more or less pointing out a general direction.

Chu Xun furrowed his brows and said, "What's going on..."

"Is that weird?"

"Not so much weird, but it is rather strange," Chu Xun gazed at the compass, his brows furrowing even more. "He seems to be in two directions?"

Mo Ran was startled.

How could that be?

Right now, the Cognizance Soul was in Chu Wanning's body, the Human Soul was inside the Soul-Calling Lantern, which means there should only be just the one Earth Soul left in the Underworld, so how could Chu Wanning appear in two places simultaneously?

Chu Xun continued, "In any case, there's one to the southeast and one to the northeast. The little gongzi should go check in both directions. It's possible that the compass was affected by some kind of magic and couldn't pinpoint the right location."

Filled with anxiety, Mo Ran thanked Chu Xun and hurried out of Tailwind Hall, headed eastward.

He ran for a long while, but his footsteps were abruptly halted by a fork in the road.

Southeast or northeast?

He held up the Soul-Calling Lantern anxiously, but a little while later, as he stared at the lantern in his hand that held the Human Soul, he suddenly felt some kind of a strange, vague feeling in his heart.

Following this feeling that seemed to vacillate between drawing closer and retreating, he walked along narrow roads and dark alleys.

The feeling became more distinct the further he went.
He even felt like Chu Wanning's Earth Soul was calling the lantern in his hand, or rather, calling him toward a certain place.

Mo Ran finally came to a stop in front of an old, wooden building that was two-story tall.

"Ailing Souls Sanitarium."

He looked up, gaze sweeping across the large, heavy-looking plaque above the door. The plaque's black paint had peeled off from so long in the sun and wind, and the raised lettering had also lost most of its red paint, revealing the molding, decaying wood underneath.

Mo Ran frowned, heart tremoring in his chest—these three words made him feel uneasy.

Ailing souls... what does that mean?

Is this why Chu Xun's compass didn't work?

He pushed open the door and went in, stepping over a tall threshold.

He found his answers soon enough.

There were hundreds of beds inside, with unconscious souls lying on them. A dozen-odd ghosts wearing white masks were going around channeling spiritual energy to those on the sickbeds.

This so-called Ailing Souls Sanitarium was the Underworld's infirmary.

Mo Ran found the ghost doctor overseeing things in the inner section and cupped his hands respectfully toward him, saying, "Doctor, I..."

The doctor was very busy and said impatiently, "Prescription pickup's on second floor, examination queue is to the left."

"Then where do I go if I'm looking for someone?"

"Looking for someone's over at... huh? Looking for someone?"

Mo Ran showed him the portrait. "Have you seen him?"

The ghost doctor took the painting and looked it over, then looked back up at Mo Ran. Under the holes in the mask, there was pity in his eyes. "Your relative?"

"Mhm, yes."

"His Earth Soul is damaged," the ghost doctor pointed toward the stairs. "He's in the innermost partitioned compartment upstairs. This kind of illness is untreatable, we can only delay it for the time being. You should go see him."

Mo Ran started, "Damaged? Damaged how?"

"Who knows? The cycle of reincarnation is an agonizing thing, it's possible his soul was damaged during his last couple of reincarnations, or, since he was a cultivator this life, maybe he had a qi deviation that damaged his soul. Either way it's no longer whole, how am I supposed to know how it happened."

Mo Ran asked apprehensively, "Then... then would a damaged Earth Soul affect anything?"

"Affect?" the ghost doctor thought for a moment. "It's not a huge issue, since it's only one of three souls that's incomplete, so it won't affect his ability to reincarnate. If anything... in the next life, he'll probably have a shorter lifespan, poorer luck, or a weaker constitution."

“.....” Mo Ran was reluctant to accept that, but there was nothing to be done about it, so he could only thank the ghost doctor and head upstairs.

It was less densely packed upstairs than it had been downstairs, which was so crowded it was hard to breathe.

Maybe because the souls here were those that could not be revived, so there wasn't much of a need to watch over them, but there was only one doctor in the entrance hall, napping leisurely on a rattan chair.

Mo Ran left him alone and headed straight inside.

Such a big space, but there were only ten, twenty sickbeds laid out next to the rosewood windows, partitioned off with white screens in between.

It was dead silent.

The floor creaked beneath his feet. Mo Ran's eyes landed on the innermost compartment. It was next to a half-moon shaped door, outside of which was an open balcony. The moonlight poured in through a thin layer of silk curtain that drifted in the breeze.

There were twenty-odd sick souls here, yet for some reason, Mo Ran had an intense awareness of exactly where to go.

Perhaps it was the Soul-Calling Lantern showing him the way, but he walked directly to the innermost compartment without so much as a sideways glance, coming to a stop in that pure, hazy moonlight.

He lifted the curtain.

The last piece of Chu Wanning's soul lay there. His eyes were closed and his face colorless, looking just like the body resting at Frostskey Hall.

Despite having found him, despite the hope of rebirth now being within reach, Mo Ran still couldn't help the ache in his heart and the stinging in his nose as he gazed at that frail, bloodstained figure.

He walked over and set the Soul-Calling Lantern down by the bedside.

Then he sat down on the bed, wanting to gently hold the other's ice-cold hand.

But this soul was different from the Human Soul from before. Maybe because the damage was too severe, but his body was actually incorporeal; Mo Ran couldn't touch Chu Wanning's Earth Soul, his fingers passing right through him to land on the clean white sheets.

Such incorporeality left Mo Ran feeling unbearably lost and pained.

If something had gone wrong, if Master Huaizui hadn't come, if Chu Wanning's soul had been just slightly more damaged, if Shizun had despaired and refused to see him...

He bent down, and though he knew he wouldn't be able to lay his forehead against Chu Wanning's, he still couldn't help closing his eyes and leaning over the bed like he was embracing that faint, fragile Earth Soul.

“Shizun.”

He overlapped with his soul, the moonlight spilling over them, indistinct and indistinguishable.

Mo Ran let out a long exhale in a sigh, but his heart was heavy and bitter.

He had seen Chu Wanning's body, then his Human Soul, and now this sickly Earth Soul, and felt something different upon seeing each. He had knelt before the body, his sins and his guilt nearly tearing him apart. He had repented before the Human Soul, and held his hand as he begged him to return.

But the Earth Soul.

He tried to hold him, yet he couldn't reach him, couldn't touch him. He suddenly felt a bottomless dread, that this was what he deserved.

He was laden with so many sins, his hands were covered in blood. What merit, what *right* did he have to accompany him at his side again, to stay by his side?

Mo Ran kept his eyes closed. The wetness on his eyelashes soaked into the flimsy pillow.

He once thought that the Heavens were unkind to him, but that seemed to him such an absurd joke now. That wasn't the case at all. It turned out that the Heavens were very kind to him; it was his own heart that was unkind, that made everything seem dark and gloomy.

He was wrong.

He suddenly realized that he had once walked a road of no return. He wanted to turn back, he wanted to use the rest of his life to make up for it, use the rest of his life to pay it back. He didn't know if that would be enough to go back to the start.

Forget Taxian-Jun, forget Emperor of the Human Realm.

He didn't want any of it.

He wanted only to lead a proper life, to be the kind of righteous person that Chu Wanning had always wanted him to be.

People say that recognizing your mistakes and changing for the better was the most important part.

But he had sinned so deeply.

He didn't know how long it would take to make up for it; perhaps he'll never be able to escape this endless remorse, even until the day he dies. After all, a scar cut into the waters could return to evenness, but a wound stabbed into a tree will always be there.

"Shizun." After a long time immersed in the light of the moon, immersed in Chu Wanning's nearly see-through soul, he said in a voice like he was coaxing a child, "Come on, let's go home."

He straightened up and picked up the Soul-Calling Lantern.

He recited the incantation silently, and the Earth Soul went inside, the faint silhouette disappearing into the lantern in no time.

Mo Ran waited.

He waited for a long while, until the Earth Soul and the Human Soul had merged completely into one, and then he waited some more, but still nothing happened.

Mo Ran's face paled.

What happened?!

Wasn't he supposed to be able to bring Chu Wanning back to the living world once the Earth Soul and the Human Soul had merged?

Was Master Huaizui's spell not working?!

Ch.109 Shizun's Second Earth Soul

Head numb and thoughts a jumble of white noise, Mo Ran's hands and feet felt like ice as he hugged Chu Wanning's soul to himself and went back downstairs in a daze.

“Doctor...”

“You again? What is it this time?”

“You’re sure that the one upstairs... is my Shizun’s Earth Soul, right?”

The ghost doctor was rather annoyed. “Of course it is, I wouldn’t get something like that wrong.”

Still refusing to give up, Mo Ran tried again, “Could it be the Cognizance Soul, or...”

“Or what,” the ghost doctor tsk’d. “A person has three souls: Earth, Cognizance, and Human. I’ve already practiced here for a hundred fifty years, if I can’t even tell the three souls apart, Lord Yanluo would’ve kicked me back into the Wheel of Reincarnation long ago.”

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, then an uncertain thought occurred to him.

“Doctor, in your hundred fifty years here, have you ever seen anyone with... two Earth Souls?”

“What’s wrong with you!” the ghost doctor snapped crossly. “Looks to me like your head’s not working right, maybe you should let me take your pulse!”

Of course he couldn’t let the ghost doctor *actually* take his pulse; Master Huaizui may have cast an enchantment on him, but if he wasn’t careful, he could probably still get found out, so Mo Ran offered a hasty apology and fled out of the Ailing Souls Sanitarium holding the lantern with the Human and Earth Souls inside.

It was always dim in the Ghost Realm. The only way to tell day from night was to look up at the sky: if there was a lukewarm sun behind the layer of murky mist and heavy red clouds, then it was day; if a cold moon hung high above, then it was night.

It was night right now, and the roads were slowly emptying out.

Holding the Soul-Calling Lantern in his arms, Mo Ran walked through the streets by himself with his head lowered. He didn’t know what to do, and the more he walked, the more helpless and alone he felt.

Such helplessness and uncertainty had once been a daily part of his childhood; having to face these feelings once again now unsettled him. He remembered the people he used to know back when he was getting by at the pleasure house. The House of Drunken Jade had gone up in flames in the end. Everyone died, but he alone survived...

Counting the years, everyone—aside from his mom—had probably yet to be reincarnated. He didn’t know whom he might run into if he just kept walking like this.

Then he thought of Xue Meng.

He thought of Xue Meng’s angry bellows as he tried to wrest the Soul-Calling Lantern from his hands, calling him a “god damn scourge!”

——“What right do you have, have you no shame.”

Hugging the lantern to himself, Mo Ran walked slower and slower until he stopped next to a wall, the rims of his eyes red despite his best efforts. He gazed at that gentle, golden flame with his head lowered, and muttered in a tiny voice:

“Shizun, is it that you... that you really don’t want to go back with me?”

The flame didn’t answer, only continued to burn silently.

He stood there for a long time before he managed to calm back down.

The Underworld was so big, and he didn't know where or whom he could go to. Then he suddenly thought of Chu Xun, and hurriedly ran toward Tailwind Hall like he had grasped a lifeline.

When he got there, Tailwind Hall was just about to close, and a masked ghost was shutting the doors and locking up. Mo Ran hastily stopped him, entreating apprehensively, "Sorry, but please wait!"

"It's you?"

The masked person was the same one that had led him upstairs earlier. He paused for a moment, then said, "What did you come back for?"

"Sorry to trouble you, but it's urgent..." Mo Ran had ran too fast; he panted for breath, eyes bright yet anxious. He swallowed and said hoarsely, "I want to see Sir Chu Xun again."

Chu Xun was staring absently at a branch of haitang blossoms in a slender white porcelain vase, and was startled to suddenly see Mo Ran return.

"Why did the little gongzi come back? Were you unable to find him?"

Mo Ran replied, "I found him, but I... I..."

Chu Xun saw how tense and anxious he was and guessed that whatever trouble he had must be difficult to talk about, so he invited him in and closed the door, saying, "Have a seat."

Worried that Chu Xun might notice something off if he kept the Soul-Calling Lantern in his hands, Mo Ran put it away in his qiankun pouch.

It wasn't that he thought Chu Xun was a malicious ghost, but something like a living person sneaking into the Underworld was best secret from the ghosts here if at all possible.

"The little gongzi went to the southeast?"

"Mn."

"....." Chu Xun thought for a moment, then said, "It was the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, wasn't it."

Mo Ran nodded, and weighed his words before saying, "I saw him at the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, but it's an incomplete Earth Soul that can't move or speak. He even looks different from the other ghosts, half-transparent, can be seen but can't be touched."

"Damaged Earth Souls are generally like that," Chu Xun's expression was somber. "Some souls that have been agitated could even scatter, never to be gathered again."

Mo Ran chewed on his lip, then said, hesitantly, "The doctor there said that people whose souls are incomplete will have certain impairments in life during their reincarnations. But the person I'm looking for... was just fine in life, so I was wondering if there might have been a mistake somewhere."

He paused for a while, lifting his head to look towards Chu Xun.

"Sir Chu, is it possible for someone to have two Earth Souls?"

Chu Xun faltered, "Two Earth Souls?"

"Mn."

Unlike the doctor at the Ailing Souls Sanitarium who had immediately shot down Mo Ran's hypothesis, Chu Xun mulled it over carefully for a while with his gaze downcast, and then said, "I suppose... it isn't impossible."

A tremor ran through Mo Ran's body and his head snapped up, eyes bright in the dim candle light of the room.

"Really?!"

Chu Xun inclined his head, "Normally, a person only has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits, but I once knew a woman with two Cognizance Souls."

"Could you tell me more?"

Chu Xun shook his head, his eyelashes dropping lower and trembling slightly. He took a moment to steady himself before saying, "It's all things long past now, I'd rather not talk about it. That person is suffering in the seventh level of Hell right now. Anyone whose soul is abnormal, once found by Yanluo, is sent to the seventh level to be slowly peeled apart."

His words made Mo Ran even more anxious, and in the dim light, he didn't notice the pain in Chu Xun's eyes when he asked, "Why does that woman have an extra Cognizance Soul? Normal people only need to gather their three souls after the seventh day, so if someone has an extra Earth Soul, then would all four souls need to be gathered?"

"That is probably the case."

"Then the woman you mentioned..."

"She was used by the Ninth King in death, forced back to the living world..." Chu Xun paused, the slender fingers resting on his knee slowly clenching into a fist, "to the living world, and ate her own child alive."

"!!" Mo Ran abruptly recalled the past events of Lin'an that he had borne witness to at the Peach Blossom Springs, and only then did he realize that the "woman" of whom Chu Xun spoke was actually his wife, that these were his most painful memories.

Then the reason Chu Xun had stayed at Nanke Village rather than reincarnate into his next life was to wait for his wife to be peeled of that extra soul and come back from the seventh level to reunite with him, so that they could reincarnate together?

Mo Ran couldn't bear to pry any more than he already had.

Chu Xun said no more of it either. To mention something like this again, in just these few, understated words—"ate her own child alive"—even after two hundred years, even as a ghost, his throat still trembled.

He closed his eyes.

"The woman's soul became scrambled and torn, and fused with the child's Cognizance Soul," a long while passed before he continued. "So her extra soul is actually that child's Cognizance Soul that got stuck between hers, which slowly assimilated into her soul until it became a part of it, completely and inseparably."

This person, in death as in life, always endured his own pain to help others.

Mo Ran felt horrible. He couldn't say it directly, and could only say, "You don't have to say any more, I, I understand now."

"The reason I'm telling you these things is to let you know that, if the Chugongzi you're looking for really does have two Earth Souls, then most likely one of them was not originally his."

Mo Ran turned it over in his head for a while, then asked, "Is it not possible that it was one Earth Soul split into two?"

"It's possible, but not in your case."

"How come?"

Chu Xun explained, "I've seen a soul split in two as well, but that's another story. Something like that generally only happens when someone has sinned so deeply and killed so wantonly that their souls are unable to bear it and shatter as a result. But even then, the one that shatters is always the Human Soul which is responsible for morality and humanity, and never the Earth Soul or the Cognizance Soul."

"...I see," Mo Ran muttered.

He had already concluded that this scenario had nothing to do with Chu Wanning as soon as he heard "sinned so deeply and killed so wantonly." But as for he himself, on the other hand, he wondered; when he truly meets his end in this life and comes to the Underworld, will his Human Soul shatter into two, will he get his just deserts?

Chu Xun added, "Besides, if it really was one soul split into two, then the other half of the Earth Soul would've been unable to walk and gotten sent to the Ailing Souls Sanitarium as well. Since the little gongzi only saw one damaged Earth Soul there, then I think the other one should be a complete, healthy soul."

Mo Ran lit up immediately at his remark as things clicked into place, and he said in a hurry, "Thank you so much, Sir Chu! Then I... I'll go back to searching right now!"

"Very good. Aside from pointing toward the Ailing Souls Sanitarium earlier, the compass also pointed in the northeast direction. The little gongzi should try going in that direction. Though, Nanke Village is vast, with so many ghosts coming and going while waiting their turn to reincarnate..."

Chu Xun sighed.

Mo Ran saw those gentle eyes tinged faintly with pity, and already knew what he wanted to say.

The vastness of Nanke Village, the millions of wandering ghosts.

Even knowing the direction, it would be no easy task to find one particular Earth Soul.

If two people were not fated, then even if the streets were so brightly lit it appeared not to be night at all, they would still brush right past one another as they walked, one toward the east and one toward the west, never once noticing the other, never even seeing the other.

And with the Underworld silent as it was now, it was even easier said than done.

But Chu Xun was a gentle soul in the end. He lifted his hand and clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. "The little gongzi has such heartfelt sincerity, you will surely meet him again."

He looked so much like Chu Wanning, and as he spoke, a bead of melted wax dripped slowly down and the candle flame flickered, making his face look even more indistinct.

In the dimness, Mo Ran seemed to see Chu Wanning's face in a moment of gentleness, seemed to hear Chu Wanning say to him that they will meet again.

Wetness gathered in Mo Ran's eyes despite himself.

He hurriedly lowered his head and clasped his hands in a gesture of respect, voice hoarse as he said, "Really, thank you so much."

But Chu Xun said nothing in response. Even when Mo Ran had already turned and left, closing the door behind him, he was still standing there staring after him, a hint of bewilderment flickering in his phoenix eyes.

Were those... tears he saw... in that young man's eyes?

Ghosts couldn't cry. Did he see wrong? Or...

He turned to look over his shoulder at that quietly blooming branch of haitang blossoms in the vase. Flowers from the living world couldn't bear the Yin energy of the Underworld; even with careful tending, a petal had still drifted down to land on the aged, wooden table.

Chu Xun walked over and picked up that vibrant petal. It withered and crumbled away in no time, scattering from his fingertips into powder.

"Guard."

"Sir Chu," a masked person came in immediately, standing respectfully to the side.

Chu Xun didn't turn around. He gazed at the haitang blossoms as he asked in a soft voice, "Has that person come to Tailwind Hall himself recently?"

"No, he hasn't. Things have been the same as always, a branch of haitang blossoms every ten days. He dares not come here to Tailwind Hall himself, and always has someone else deliver it for him."

"....."

"What is it, Sir? Was there something off about that gongzi just now? If that person dares send people to bother you, you can always ask Lord Yanluo to..."

"No," Chu Xun broke out of his daze and interrupted him, turning to smile lightly at his subordinate. He exhaled, "It's nothing, he probably wasn't sent by that person. And even if he was, that child came only to look for someone, it had nothing to do with me."

"But if that person did send him here, then why did you still go to the trouble _____"

"He had no involvement in that wrong." Chu Xun stood quietly next to the flowering branch, his robes the color of snow. "Let him be."

The streets were desolate. Mo Ran left Tailwind Hall and headed northeast, going door to door with Chu Wanning's portrait, but it was like trying to find a needle at the bottom of the sea.

Those he showed the portrait to waved their hands no; some didn't even want to look at all before walking past him.

"The person in the drawing? Never seen him before."

"Haven't seen him haven't seen him, don't disrupt my business."

"Out of my way! So damn annoying! Do you not see what time it is! Piss off! What portrait? Get it out of my face!"

Although the residents of Nanke Village were all ghosts, these ghosts had yet to sever their emotions and desires. Living together like this, most of them had gradually settled back into how they used to spend their days in the living

world. While waiting out their eight to ten long years, they would seek out some friends or relatives, or else adopt a dead cat or a dead dog; simply put, they lived as they had when they were still alive. And so, although they did not need to sleep, they would still lie down in their beds to rest when the moon climbed high up in the sky.

With the night falling, even fewer people were willing to talk to him, and no one had any information or direction for him.

He walked by himself down that long, endless street stretching into the northeast, knocking on every door and visiting every house, keeping his head down while smiling apologetically...

"I already told you!!! I saw wrong! I thought about it more and the person I saw actually wasn't the one in the drawing, can you just leave me alone already!"

The bearded man was getting ready to retire for the night with his wife and kids of the Underworld, trying to close the door.

Mo Ran had run into him on the street earlier as he'd been coming back, and had asked if he had seen the person in the portrait. He'd thought for a while and then said that he seemed to remember seeing him around the east market a couple days ago, but then his wife had thrown him a look and he'd shut up immediately as if realizing something, and started waving his hands and insisting he didn't know anything.

But Mo Ran felt like he knew, so he had refused to give up, following him the whole way home and pleading with him the entire time.

The man shoved him brusquely out the door and pulled the wooden door bolt. Mo Ran begged frantically, "Could you please think about it again? Where in the east market? And where did he go after? Please..."

"I don't know!"

The commotion drew the attention of nearby ghosts, and a crowd had gathered to watch. The man bellowed loudly and angrily as he tried to shut the door, heedless of the fact that Mo Ran's hand was still on the doorframe.

The door slammed roughly on his fingers. It was excruciating, but he couldn't care about that right now, swallowing the pain and refusing to pull his hand from the closing gap, using all of his strength to push it open instead——

"I'm begging you, please think about it again, I just want to know where he went after that..."

But the man abruptly wrenched the door open and, taking no notice of the blood welling up on Mo Ran's fingers, shoved him roughly backwards and yelled, "I already said I don't know! Fuck off!"

[1] "Brothers" here refers more to being close friends than blood relation

[2] 理理我 "pay attention to me" has a lot of nuance that can't be captured by any single word in English—it's a plea for recognition, acknowledgement, and attention, a lot of desires rolled up in one

[3] 九歌 Jiu'ge | Nine Songs - Songs addressed to deities and fallen heroes

[4] 怀罪 Huaizui--"Bearing Sins"

[5] 无悲 Wubei--"Without Sorrows"

[6] 施主 shizhu - benefactor (term used by a monk to address a layperson)

[7] 阿弥陀佛 "E mi tuo fo" - Amitabha Buddha, "merciful Buddha", greeting/prayer used by monks

[8] Upon cultivating to enlightenment, a cultivator must first shed their mortal vessel and undergo one or more heavenly trials, possibly among other requirements as well

depending on the lore, before they can become an immortal.

[9] 师祖 Shizu - grand-master, i.e., master's master

[10] 六道轮回 "the Six Realms of Reincarnation" - It is believed that life is a continuous cycle of rebirth; one must reach enlightenment to be freed from the Wheel of Reincarnation. The wheel has six sections, each representing one of Six Realms--Realm of Gods, Realm of Asuras, Realm of Hungry Ghosts, Realm of Hell, Realm of Animals, and Realm of Humans--which can be interpreted either literally as actual places or metaphorically as situations in life. After death, an individual re-enters the Wheel of Reincarnation to be reborn into one of the Six Realms according to their karma. Enlightenment and liberation from the wheel is only possible from the Human Realm.

[Further reading if you're interested.](#)

[11] 三魂七魄 "three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits" - The three ethereal souls, "Hun" ("cloud-soul"), are associated with the Yang. These are formless, spiritual consciousness that leave the body after death and continue to exist; they're lighter and tend to rise toward the heavens. The seven corporeal spirits, "Po" ("white-soul"), are associated with the Yin. These are tangible, substantive sensory perceptions that remain in the body after death; they're denser/heavier and tend to sink toward and return to the earth. [Further reading.](#)

[12] 黄泉 "Yellow Springs" aka the Underworld

[13] [Brief overview of the crimes and punishments in each level of the Eighteen Hells](#)

[14] Jin Hua'er means Gold Flower, an obvious prostitute name

[15] The title technically translates to "where to start looking for shizun" but this is the closest phrasing that starts with shizun

[16] 凡人介里许多人没慧根, 结不了善缘 this references Buddhist concepts of karma, reincarnation, fate, and cultivation to reach enlightenment; simply put, one must have enough good karma from the previous life for a good fate that allows cultivation in this life. Most ordinary folks don't have the foundations necessary to cultivate, so normal people mocking those who have the privilege to cultivate is just them putting down something they wish they could have.

[17] 陪葬 item(s) buried with the dead to go to the afterlife with them

[18] Boya was a guqin player, and Zhong Ziqi was a person who could understand and appreciate his playing perfectly. When Ziqi died, Boya snapped the strings of his guqin and never played again because no one will ever understand him like that again. Exemplifies close/ideal friendship. [Wiki](#)

[19] 秀才 xiuca - someone who's passed the county (lowest) level of the imperial exam system

[20] 君子之交淡如水 friendship between gentlemen is light as water - two interpretations: 1) between gentlemen, i.e., learned individuals of high moral caliber, friendship should be easy and natural, clear as water; and 2) maintaining a certain distance in friendship is healthy, and frequent interactions are not required to be good friends who are there for one another in times of need

[21] 凤眼 [phoenix eyes] and 缝眼 [slit eyes] sound exactly the same: feng yan

[22] 潘安范蠡, 西子貂蝉 Pan An, Fan Li, Xi Zi, and Diao Chan

[Pan An, aka Pan Yue](#) - poet and politician, known as "the most beautiful man of ancient times"

[Fan Li](#) - businessman and military strategist, Xi Shi's lover

[Xi Zi, aka Xi Shi](#) - one of the Four Legendary Beauties

[Diao Chan](#) - another of the Four Legendary Beauties

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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[Ch.119 Shizun's Four Souls Assembled](#)

Ch.110 Shizun Doesn't Know About the Little Puppy's Past^[1]

Mo Ran wandered the streets by himself. There were still ghosts drifting eerily about the streets as well, and the bluestone steps were covered in lonesome clumps of moss, wet and slippery beneath his feet...

Only now that he'd calmed down after the fierce struggle did he finally notice that his fingers had been scraped raw and bloody. The doorframe was crudely made and covered in splinters that had gotten embedded into his hand and made a mess of it, but luckily it was dark enough that the ghosts didn't notice.

He stared quietly at it for a while with his lashes downcast. Perhaps because the pain in his heart was far greater, but the gruesome wounds on his hand didn't really hurt.

He looked back at that firmly-shut door, and knew well that the man behind it wouldn't speak another word to him.

Mo Ran was no stranger to such rejection. He was already more than used to malevolence, to the point that he could tell whether or not his plea would have any effect from just the look in their eyes and a couple of words.

Truth be told, the moment that man had changed to saying "haven't seen him", Mo Ran already instinctively knew that he wasn't going to get another truthful word out of him. It was just that he didn't want to give up because it had to do with Chu Wanning's Earth Soul, so he had persisted until he had been shoved outside and the door had slammed in his face.

It's been a long time since he had last been refused so brutally. But sometimes, the passage of time couldn't really resolve anything, and neither could happier circumstances change that which was innate—some things were simply carved into the bones.

Xue Meng had once called him a lowlife scum.

It's funny, but these venomous words from the darling of the heavens didn't even make a dent in his dignity.

That's right, he *is* what everyone calls a lowlife scum. He'd been called much worse things more times than he could count, he was already used to it.

He glanced over his shoulder at that tightly-closed wooden door one last time, then slowly walked away in the low snickers of the crowd of spectating ghosts.

He stood alone amidst voices of derision and ridicule.

Such a scene of abject helplessness, once again after so many years, overlapped with the distant, faded memories of his childhood. Mo Ran put one foot in front of the other; maybe because the circumstances were really too much alike, but he couldn't help thinking about those days when it had been just him and his mom...

In those days, they weren't at the pleasure house yet, but wandered the streets of Linyi near Rufeng Sect.

In those days, at least he still had his mom.

His mother loved him. He was still small and she didn't want him to go out begging for food, so she always had him stay in an abandoned firewood shed while she went out to sing and perform on the street.

She had a good foundation and could dance on a bamboo pole, so she usually managed to earn a couple of coins each day to buy a piece of flatbread and a bowl of congee^[2] to share between mother and son. Mothers always

wanted their children to eat more, but Mo Ran would only take a few bites before saying the flatbread was too hard, the congee was too bland, or that he was full, and refused to eat any more.

Little did she know, but every time she sighed and ate the “left over” half of the flatbread and half bowl of congee, the small child curled up to the side pretending to be asleep was always secretly watching her through squinted eyes, only relaxing after making sure she had filled her stomach, feeling at ease despite the rumbling in his own.

Nor did she know that every day after she left to perform on the streets at Linyin’s east market, her child would crawl out from the pile of firewood and sneak out to beg for food two streets over from where she performed.

The mother sang a beautiful song as she propped up the ten feet tall pole and danced upon it with her frail body. The ground below her was covered in shattered rocks and broken ceramics; if she were to fall, all of the sharp pieces would pierce into her body. But the spectators thought it novel and exciting, and so she staked her lowborn life and danced, just to win a smile from the moneyed onlookers.

Two streets away, her child begged on the street, going door by door, grinning with his grubby little face and saying the same greetings for good fortune over and over, hoping for something to eat. But he didn’t get anything, not often.

One day, a young madam of a wealthy family, pregnant, bored, and in a foul mood, was strolling around the streets when she saw Mo Ran’s mother dancing on the pole.

She went over and watched for a while, intrigued, and then sent an attendant to go speak to the dancer, “These broken rocks and ceramic bits you have on the ground are just for looks, where’s the sincerity? Our Madam says that if you replace them with knives, blade-up, and dance over that, then she will reward you with ten taels of gold.”

Faced with such a cruel request, practically demanding her life.
But the mother’s only response was: “I can’t afford to buy any knives.”

The wealthy madam laughed and immediately had someone go to the ironware store, purchase a hundred sharp knives, and arrange them upright on the ground.

“Dance.”

The richly-adorned woman said gleefully as she caressed her bulging belly.

A crowd of fiends and demons, eager to watch the sport, had already began to gather, all of them decked out in silks and jades that sparkled in the sun. They were like vultures that had scented the stench of blood in the air and gathered to feed on the corpse, with their necks outstretched and their eyes glinting.

“Go on, dance.”

“Dance well and I’ll give you money.”

“There’s tips to be had!”

The areas under Rufeng Sect’s jurisdiction had no shortage of wealthy people. What it lacked was the excitement and liveliness of such life-risking wagers.

Those silks and satins, gold and pearls closed in on the mother with the bamboo pole, surrounded the penniless woman in rags.

And so the woman, her life as cheap as wild grass by the roadside, smiled and curtsied toward the crowd of carrion vultures, thanking them for their patronage, and then began a graceful dance upon the pole, light as a swallow. Dancing upon the blades, staking her life. Staking her life to garner their favor.

But although she was skilled, she inadvertently glanced down at the rows upon rows of sharp knives as she went in for the landing. Her bamboo pole tilted a couple of degrees in that moment of panic, and as alarmed cries rang out from the crowd, she fell——

She managed to avoid the area with the most knives, but still skirted the edge, slashing her legs open, the crowd crying out once again as blood spattered.

Ignoring the pain, she hurriedly stood up, offering a smile as she lowered her head in apology.

The spectators commented with a sneer, "Missy's skills aren't quite there yet, better practice more."

"That's right, you gotta have some skill if you wanna make a living, half-baked foolery won't get you far."

A few of the kinder people, their eyes brimming with tears, said sympathetically, "Ay, enough already, look at the poor girl's injury, hurry to the apothecary and get some medicine for it."

The woman said hesitantly, "I don't... I don't have any money for medicine..."

Those people faltered, some sighing, others lifting their hands to touch their jades and pearls, but none of them spoke. A couple dabbed at the corners of their eyes, as if deeply touched.

"How pitiful."

"Indeed, indeed."

"Seeing as how hard your life is, I'll give you some money," said an elderly woman with a big belly as she took out her bulging purse, fished out a handful of gold leaflets, held them in her hands, and kept digging until she dug out three copper coins, weighed them in her hand, returned two, then very solemnly placed one copper coin in the mother's hand.

Having given generously, the elderly woman allowed tracks of well-earned tears roll down her cheeks as she spoke in a tone of benevolence, "Miss, you deserve this, take it."

The woman clutched the copper coin that she had used her life to exchange for, and murmured blankly, "Thank you..."

Thank you...

And that wealthy madam that had promised her ten gold? She had already walked off, cursing.

The woman staggered after her on bleeding legs, wanting to ask her for the money, but was shoved to the ground by her attendants, who swore so loudly they could be heard a whole street over——

"What bad luck!"

"Our Madam must keep her baby safe, the sight of blood is inauspicious! Master will be so worried if he hears."

“And you still have the nerve to ask for money, you call that a dance? It’s a good thing your blood didn’t get on our Madam, or else—or else there’d be consequences!”

“Scram!”

The woman was shoved to the ground roughly, but they were from a well-known family of affluence in Linyin, so no one was willing to stand up for her. She twisted in pain on the ground, writhing like a lowly insect.

No one came to help her up...

No one was willing to open their purse for her...

She had danced with her life on the line, but all she got for it was a single, cold copper coin.

The kind woman who gave it to her had said that it was what she deserved.

She didn’t spare a thought for herself, but she had earned only one coin today, what could she buy with that? All that would get her was a single piece of flatbread without any filling, not even a bowl of congee to go with it, and now that her leg was hurt, she wouldn’t be able to dance tomorrow, but what about her child... he was still so small, so skinny, he’ll go hungry again...

She really couldn’t take it anymore, thinking about that. She curled up in the mud and wept sorrowfully, her voice raw and shuddering. Unable to bear the sound of it, the onlookers sighed and began to disperse.

Just then, a dirty child with a foul, stinky smell suddenly burst through the crowd.

Mo Ran ran over, yelling like a trapped beast, “Mom! MOM!!!”

He hugged her.

A lowly child hugging his lowly mother.

Like a bug clinging to grass, like a straw dog^[3] clutching at duckweed.

Surprise and panic flashed across the woman’s eyes when she saw him. She may be weak, but mothers were strong. She stopped crying immediately—life was already hard enough, day after day like going to sleep in hell and waking in the same—she didn’t want to look weak and helpless in front of her child.

The tears on her face weren’t even dry yet, but she hurriedly arranged her features into a smile, saying, “Aiyah, look at you, what are you doing here? Mom is fine, it’s just a scratch... oh, but look...”

She stuffed the sweat-covered copper coin clutched in her hand into his.

Mo Ran shook his head over and over, tears washing tracks down his dirty little face.

“It’s enough for a piece of flatbread, go on... go buy one, mom will wait right here for you, then we can go home.”

Home?

Where is home?

That run-down storage shed?

Or that sheep pen they once slept in before getting chased out two days later...

Mo Ran fought back sobs, fire burning in his eyes as he said, “Mom, just sit here and rest for a while.”

“What’re you going to—don’t do anything foolish—”

Mo Ran ran to the side and picked up a knife, then shouted loud and clear in his still-young voice, drawing back the attention of the dispersing crowd.

"Lords and ladies, please wait! Please wait! We still have a special performance for your lordships and ladyships, please spare a glance——"

He innately had spiritual energy since youth, and was thus much stronger than any ordinary person without aptitude, even without cultivating it.

Mo Ran held the sharp and sturdy blade in his hands, and with a low cry, broke the knife in half and tossed the pieces onto the ground.

The crowd was startled, especially the couple of cultivators among them.
"The kid's not bad."

"One more!"

Mo Ran said, picking up two knives this time and snapping both together.

"Nice!!!" Someone in the crowd clapped.

"Three knives!"

The small child added one knife after another, the crowd getting more and more excited as the stack grew thicker and harder to break.

"Gege jiejie, uncles and aunties, please spare some tips and I'll add more."

Those people, eager for a show, tossed the cheapest copper coins they could find onto the ground in front of him.

For those coins, Mo Ran added knife after knife until his hands were covered in blood and he really couldn't break any more. The carrion vultures flapped their pitch-black wings and scattered.

Mo Ran picked up the copper coins, holding them carefully in his dirty little hands, and walked over to his teary, dazed mother.

He smiled, "Mom, we can get you medicine now."

Her tears fell uncontrollably. "My child... my good boy... let mom see your hand..."

"I'm okay..." His smile was bright and pure. It scorched her heart.

She pulled him into her arms, hugging him tightly as she sobbed, "It's all mom's fault for not being able to take care of you... making you suffer so much so young..."

"It's alright," Mo Ran said quietly in his mom's arms. "I don't mind as long as I'm with you, mom... we'll get through this together, and when I grow up, I'll give mom a good life."

She smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. "It's alright even if it's not a good life, as long as you can grow up healthy and strong, that'll be good... that'll be enough."

Mo Ran nodded vigorously, then suddenly said, quietly, "Mom, if I manage to make something of myself in the future, you'll never have to put up with any of this anymore. I'll make all those people just now come and apologize to you, and if they won't, then I'll make *them* dance on knives, I..."

"Silly child, don't think like that," the kind, gentle woman stroked his hair as she whispered. "Absolutely don't think like that, don't hate anyone. Mom wants to watch you grow into a good kid; promise me you'll be a good, kind person, okay?"

Mo Ran was so young back then, like a small tender seedling—just a tiny touch of outside influence and he would lean easily into that direction—and his mother, uneducated but pure, was his first lighthouse. And so little Mo Ran

thought it over for a bit, rather puzzled, and in the end said with an air of seriousness, "Okay."

He said, "Mom, I promise you."

"Then, then in the future, if... if I can make something of myself, I'll build lots and lots of houses for people without homes, and plant lots and lots of food for people who don't have enough to eat..." he said to his mother, "mom, that way, no one will ever have to live like us again."

The woman stared blankly for a while, then said with a sigh, "That would be wonderful."

The little kid nodded in agreement, saying, "That would be wonderful."

At that time, neither of them could have anticipated that someone who would say something like that would end up treading through fields of bones with his hands covered in blood, bringing the stench of misery and ruin as vultures and crows hovered overhead, that he would become Emperor Taxian-Jun, scourge of the common people.

And scourge of the common people Emperor Taxian-Jun rarely, if ever, looked back on this chapter of his past. He didn't honor that promise made in his mother's arms back then, that promise spoken solemnly with clear eyes and a tender voice.

Back then, with his mother's guidance, no matter how hard things got, Mo Ran never hated anyone, though he did feel somewhat unresigned.

Day after day passed by just like this. But streetside performances were lively to the passersby the first time around, boring the second time, and irritating by the third. Eventually, they weren't able to earn even a single copper coin anymore, and could only resort to begging.

Mo Ran remembered a kid from a wealthy merchant family who was around his age and had a big mole by the corner of his lips. He remembered that kid sitting at the gate of his family's big courtyard, holding a bowl in his hand. The kid probably couldn't use chopsticks well yet, so he ate the golden-crispy fried dumplings in the bowl by jabbing them with the bamboo sticks. He was a picky eater, and would only eat the filling, spitting the wrappers out and tossing them to the ground to play with the dogs.

So he walked over cautiously, and stood carefully to the side.

The kid jolted at how dirty and stinky he was, screeching, "Who are you?!"

Mo Ran asked quietly, "Young master, the dumpling wrappers... could... could you give them to me?"

"Give them to you? Why would I give them to you?"

"You... you're not eating them anyway, so I just wanted to ask..."

"So what if I don't eat them, our Wangcai will." The kid pointed at the pair of fat dogs with sleek coats and said in a huff, "It's already hard enough feeding our dogs, how could I give them to you?!"

Mo Ran forced a smile, saying, "Then, if the dogs can't finish..."

"As if that would ever happen! They get braised meat every day and even that's not enough, this is just dumpling wrappers, two bites and it's all gone. Either way, none for you, shoo, shoo!"

Hearing the words 'braised meat', Mo Ran couldn't help looking at those dogs, all of a sudden thinking, with how fat they were, if cooked, they must be... He couldn't help swallowing as he stared at the dogs.

The kid noticed him swallowing. He froze for a second, then yelled in shock, "What are you up to?!"

"I, nothing... I just..."

"You want to eat Wangcai and Wangfu^[4]?"

Mo Ran said in a panic, "N-no, I was just really hungry and couldn't help thinking about it, sorry..."

But the little young master couldn't care less what he had to say; the words "couldn't help thinking about it" already scared the blood out of his face.

How could a wealthy family's kid possibly understand that someone could think of his adorable little watchdogs as food? Frightened by the freak in front of him, he started screaming.

"Somebody come! Hurry and chase him away!!"

The household servants crowded in on Mo Ran and started kicking and punching him before he could say anything. In that rain of blows, he tried to grab as many of the fried dumpling wrappers on the ground as he could, holding them tightly in his hands and not letting go however hard they kicked.

The little young master was terrified, tossing the remaining dumplings alongside the chopsticks to the ground and running away.

Mo Ran crawled arduously over, dragging his small, skinny body that's been beat blue and purple. One of his eyes hurt too much to open—a kick had landed there—but he smiled happily as he reached out and grabbed those leftover dumplings.

There were two dumplings left.
With the filling still in them...

One for himself, one for mother...
Or both for mother, just the wrappers is fine for him...

But before he could leave with the dumplings, one of the servants' feet came down in the chaos and crushed those dumplings skewered on the bamboo chopstick. The crispy wrappers cracked, and the mincemeat filling turned into paste.

He gripped the dirty, broken chopstick in a daze as kicks and punches rained down on him. He couldn't feel the pain, but his tears began to fall because the dumplings couldn't be eaten anymore, squeezing out from between swollen-shut eyelids to stream down a small face so dirty it was hard to see his features.

He only wanted another child's leftover, unwanted food.

Why would they rather waste it, crush it, turn it into paste, than to let him have it?

Later, Mo Ran became a young master of Sisheng Peak, and many within the sect tried to suck up to him, to ingratiate themselves to him. His birthday was filled with gifts and well wishes from people he hardly even spoke to.

The child that once had to crawl on the ground and scramble for discarded dumpling wrappers finally received an abundance of praise and fawning. But

standing before that pile of carefully-selected presents, he found himself gripped by a vague sense of dread.

He was afraid that those presents would disappear, that they would get smashed, that something would happen out of the blue and everything in front of him would suddenly become crushed underfoot like those dumplings he once held in his hands but never got to eat. And so, out of that pile of things, he quickly used the useables, and quickly ate the edibles. As for the things that couldn't be used or eaten, he dug a secret little compartment in his room and carefully hid those intricate gifts inside, counting them every day, and then counting again just to be sure.

Xue Meng had made fun of him, pointing and laughing, "Hahaha, it's just a box of pastries from Lin'an's Breeze Bakery, it's no big deal if they go bad or go to waste, but look at you, shoving them all down your throat in one go. Did you starve to death in the last life or something? No one's gonna fight you for them."

He had only just arrived at Sisheng Peak back then, and truthfully still felt extremely uneasy and insecure deep down.

So he only grinned at his cousin's mocking, crumbs still at the corner of his mouth, before lowering his head back down and opening another box of pastries.

Xue Meng was amazed. "What an appetite, aren't you stuffed?"
He only kept eating.

"...Don't force yourself if you're full, I get tons of pastries every year for my birthday too, but who can eat that many pastries..."

Mo Ran's cheeks were stuffed full and bulging; he was actually choking a little from eating too fast. He glanced at Xue Meng, sitting across from him, with teary black eyes.

In that moment, he suddenly thought of that little young master he had met when he was younger, the one who could be picky about his food as much as he wanted, who ate the filling from his fried dumplings and tossed the wrappers to his dogs.

Xue Meng probably grew up like that too. That's why he could so easily say things like "just toss it if you can't finish it," "no one's gonna fight you for them."
He really, really, really envied them.

Now that he was a young master of a famed sect leading a life of luxury, he should by all rights be able to feel comfortable and secure, to waste and squander as he felt like.

But he didn't dare.

In the end, what he did was pick up the cup at the side and chug several mouthfuls of water to wash down the pastries that were stuck in his throat, then continue to force himself to eat more.

Even later, he became Emperor Taxian-Jun.

Everything under the skies belonged to him.

The most gorgeous beauties, the finest of wines, the most exquisite delicacies, golds silvers pearls and jades, and treasured artifacts alike were gifted to him in a never-ending stream from all over the world.

One day, a wealthy ore merchant came from Lin'an with a rare, ten thousand year old black fire jade that had been discovered during mining, saying he wanted to gift it to Emperor Taxian-Jun.

People like him who come bearing gifts of treasures hoping for a title of nobility or official post, or else trying to ingratiate themselves and garner favor were really far too many to count. Mo Ran usually just ignored them.

But Chu Wanning just so happened to have come down with the chills that day. Mo Ran frowned a little; black fire jade was excellent for expelling the cold, and he'd prefer that invalid to get better quick, certainly beats him lying in bed all day being a damn eyesore... and so he agreed to see that wealthy merchant.

The merchant was around his age, a bit chubby, and had a big mole by the corner of his lips with a hair growing from it.

Upon the throne inside Wushan Palace sat Mo Ran, with his slender hands folded and the tips of his fingers resting against his chin, staring silently at him until the greasy merchant's legs went weak and sweat soaked his back.

A long moment passed before the merchant, shaking all over and lips quivering, suddenly fell to his knees and began to kowtow over and over again, stammering, "Your Majesty, this lowly one... this lowly one..."

He stammered for quite a while without managing to say anything, his fat body trembling incessantly under gold-embroidered clothing the whole time.

Mo Ran suddenly smiled.

He could never forget this person, though he had only ever seen him once.

That year, the little kid with the mole by the corner of his lips who had sat in front of the wealthy family's extravagant residence, with the kind of lavish mannerism that Mo Ran had never thought he himself would ever possess. He'd sat there, jabbing into his bowl of golden dumplings with his bamboo chopsticks, a greasy sheen on his lips to match the greasy sheen on the crispy dumplings.

He said with a smile, "Did you know? The fried dumplings at your place are delicious."

He never actually got to taste them, but he had obsessed over them for half his life.

Sitting on his throne, Mo Ran watched the person below him go from terrified to astounded to bewildered to sycophantic, muttering obsequiously about having his chef come over to Sisheng Peak right away as a gift to Emperor Taxian-Jun.

In that moment, Mo Ran knew clearer than ever that so many in this world would rather kneel and lick the boots of the strong than look down and show the weak even the tiniest bit of sympathy or kindness.

Mo Ran shook his head, trying to shake off these memories of bygone days.

He rarely ever reminisced about his past; it was his weak spot, he didn't want it.

But the scene of asking door by door and being rejected door by door was so much like the past that the fetters deep within his mind came undone against his will, and for a time, he was caught up in the darkness of his past.

He stared off in a daze for a while.

He thought, so he had once promised his mother, when he was young, that he "wouldn't hold grudges," promised her that he would "build countless houses to shelter all the cold people in this world who didn't have homes, so that everyone could smile"...

But he didn't keep his word.

And in the end, he had even caused the death of the last person who treated him well. He'd caused Chu Wanning's death, caused his own Shizun's death.

Chu Wanning...

Mo Ran's heart ached at the very thought of him. He absently took out that thin piece of paper bearing Chu Wanning's likeness from his robes. The paper had become a bit wrinkled; he pressed his lips together and wordlessly raised his hand, wanting to smooth it out, but blood smeared onto the paper as soon as he touched it.

He jerked his hand back in a panic, afraid to dirty the portrait, and did not dare to touch it any more.

He walked from the fifth street to the third street, still asking door by door, unresigned. But all the ghosts only say they've "never seen the man in the portrait."

He walked alone through the endless night. It was so dark, so long, that it seemed like he'll never reach the dawn no matter how hard he tried and how long he walked. Mo Ran finally felt a little worn out; he hadn't had anything to eat or drink at all, and really was nearing his limits. Luckily, he spotted a stall selling wontons^[5] by the side of the street, so he went over and bought a bowl, and sneakily ate when no one was looking.

All the food in the Underworld was cold; there was no steam rising off the wontons.

Mo Ran took out the Soul-Calling Lantern, scooped up a spoonful of wonton, and held it out toward the lantern, "Does Shizun want some?"

Of course Shizun wouldn't answer.

So Mo Ran ate it himself, talking between mouthfuls, "Then again, you never did care for wontons. You only like sweets. Once I find you and we get back home, I'll make you pastries every day."

In the quiet of night, one person and one lantern sat by the lonely wonton stall as a breeze rustled past, occasionally bringing with it a few withered leaves. In this moment, even the Underworld seemed serene.

"Peach blossom cake, osmanthus sweets, walnut crisp, cloud cake^[6]..." he listed to the lantern while counting off on his fingers, as if that would make Chu Wanning respond. He counted for a while, then forced a smile, saying, "Shizun, just where is your other Earth Soul?"

The young man reached out with his slender hand and gently caressed the silk surface of the lantern, just like he had that year when he was thirty, when Chu Wanning died, when he had held the other man's body in his arms and stared off blankly in a daze and muttered, "Chu Wanning, I really hate you so much," but then lowered his head and pressed his lips to his cheek.

"Sonny, you new here?"

Suddenly, a voice like a broken gong spoke up. The old man selling the wontons was terribly nearsighted in his old age, and felt his way over to sit down next to Mo Ran. He had probably died of old age in his own bed, his darkly suntanned face wizened and lined like a poplar tree in the desert. He took out a smoking pipe from his burial clothes and put it in his mouth, then started chatting with Mo Ran with a kindness and nosiness unique to the elderly.

Mo Ran sniffled and turned to grin at him, "Mn, first day."

"No wonder I don't recognize you at all. Don't mind me asking, but how did you die so young?"

"Qi deviation."

"Oh..." the old man inhaled smoke from his pipe, though it remained dark and unlit, "a cultivator huh."

"Mn," Mo Ran nodded and glanced at him. He didn't really expect anything to come out of it, but still took out the portrait scroll from his robes, asking, "Grandpa^[7], I'm looking for someone. This is my Shizun, he also only came down here not long ago. Would you happen to have seen him?"

The grandpa took the drawing and hunched over closer to the light, squinting at it for a long, long while through cataract-grown eyes.

Mo Ran let out a sigh and reached over to take the drawing back. "It's alright, I've already asked lots of people, it's ok if you don't know either, everyone else also..."

"I've seen him."

"!!" Mo Ran jolted, and even the blood in his veins coursed faster as he clutched hastily at the old man. "Grandpa, you've seen him?!? Y-you're sure?"

"I'm sure." The old man crossed his legs on the bench and reached over to pick at his foot. "Don't see people with looks like these every day, it's definitely your Shizun."

Mo Ran had already shot up to his feet, but then felt like he was being too curt and lowered his head in a respectful bow to the old man before looking up to ask earnestly, "Grandpa, please point the way."

"Aiyah, no need to be so polite, sonny. We're all just ghosts down here about to head on to the next life, with only eight, ten years before these memories of the last life are gone for good. This old man's son passed on early, so I've got a soft spot for all you young'uns." He wiped the tears from his eyes and blew his nose on his sleeve before finally saying, "Have you seen that grand-looking palace on the first street up there?"

"I have. That's where Shizun is?"

"Yup, right there."

"What kind of place is it?"

"It's the Fourth Ghost King's away palace," the old man sighed. "The Fourth Ghost King doesn't actually live there; it was built specifically to lock up all the beauties he has his underlings snatch from the Underworld. That Fourth Ghost King is a real lecher, comes down here at intervals to pick concubines from the away palace, men and women alike. The ones that get selected are brought with him back to the Fourth Level of Hell, the ones that don't supposedly get given to his underlings to play with. *Sigh*, the world these days——"

He wasn't even done talking yet when the little cultivator next to him tucked the lantern sitting to the side into his arms in an anxious rush and charged off into the night like a wolfdog.

The old man paused for a second, then muttered slowly with a dash of envy, "Must be nice to be young, to be able to run so fast..."

Ch.111 Shizun Is Like a Blade, You Are Like Water

>>rape, violence

The Fourth Ghost King's away palace had only one entrance, and there were guards stationed outside. Of course Mo Ran wasn't so dumb as to saunter in the front door. He vaulted up onto the roof, tucked the Soul-Calling Lantern into his qiankun pouch so that the light wouldn't draw any unnecessary attention, then flitted across the tiled rooftops, swift as a bolt of black lightning.

The away palace was already grand-looking from the outside, but the inside was even more massive, one courtyard after another full of winding corridors. Mo Ran leapt to the top of a tall building and flattened himself against the dark brown tiles of the roof. Looking down from here, the away palace was like a small town that stretched out beyond where the eye could see.

Mo Ran was exceedingly anxious.

Now he knew why that man from before wouldn't tell him where Shizun had gone—he was probably afraid of ticking off the Ghost King. But even knowing that Chu Wanning was here in this palace now, he still had no idea what to do

There were at least nine hundred rooms here, if not a thousand. Where could Chu Wanning be?

He was like a person on the cusp of finding a treasure, both his hands and heart alike trembling even more than before.

Shizun...

Where are you?

He was absorbed in his thoughts when he noticed a row of people holding red lanterns stomp around a corner, all of them decked out in golden armor and battle boots. One by one they walked from the east gate to the main walkway, and then, many convoluted turns and bends later, arrived at an unremarkable side room.

A massive old pagoda tree stood in front of that side room, neatly blocking off Mo Ran's line of sight. He could only see half of the courtyard, the other half hidden behind the lush foliage.

The ghostly soldiers went inside, and there was shouting and the sound of tables and chairs being knocked around, utter chaos. Then a frightened scream pierced abruptly through the sky as a disheveled woman was dragged out and tossed into the courtyard, her half-undone clothes slipping further in the rough manhandling and exposing large expanses of snowy skin.

"Trying to run?! Trying to fucking run?!!"

A whip landed viciously on the woman's body. It was probably a punishment tool of the Underworld, able to inflict searing, unbearable agony even on ghosts.

The woman huddled on the ground, trembling. She looked like she wanted to run, but there were soldiers everywhere and nowhere to run to.

"Fuckin' bitch, you think you can just leave the Fourth King's palace?"

"I lived a virtuous life! I did nothing wrong! Why are you people doing this to me!" The woman shrieked. "Let me go, I want to reincarnate, I don't want to stay here!!!"

She wailed as the lashes came down again.

"Serving the Fourth King frees you from having to suffer the cycle of reincarnation! You sure don't know what's good for you!"

"He didn't even pick me! Why won't you let me leave? I——AH——"

Another lash, this time on her face. The woman started weeping, trembling uncontrollably, but still tried to crawl away.

Her animalistic desperation only seemed to amuse the Fourth Ghost King's soldiers, all of them laughing boisterously. One after another, more "tributes" were dragged out from the side room.

The leader of the soldiers spoke, "Everyone's worked hard, and I know how bored you guys get. These are all the Fourth King's leftovers; go ahead and pick

whichever ones you like to play with. And if any strikes your fancy in particular, just come register with me and you can bring them home with you.”

Those lecherous ghosts howled and laughed with abandon as they went into the room to pick the prettiest goods. The woman outside wasn't spared either, boxed in by several people right there under the tree. They lunged at her like a pack of starving wolves intent on ripping her soul to pieces.

From inside the room came the sounds of rough breathing and obscene words. There were people crying, screaming, begging.

There were also those who couldn't handle the torment and wanted out, who submitted to everything and did all that they could to earn favor. In the Underworld as in the living world, people all had this same ugliness.

Mo Ran jumped nimbly off the tall building onto the roof of the side chamber, hiding himself there under the cover of night. Based on what the grandpa at the wonton stall had told him, Chu Wanning just got here and shouldn't have gone through the Ghost King's selection process yet, so he shouldn't be here. But Mo Ran was still worried, so he lifted a piece of the dark brown roof tiles halfway up and stealthily peeked through the gap.

The room smelled of sex, hot and heavy; and in that mess of debauchery, he saw a face.

Rong Jiu.

The rent boy he had been fond of in the last life, but who had used his fondness to scheme against him and try to steal his cultivation. He was in there as well.

He was a clever thing who knew death as well as he knew life.

Many people in the room were struggling, not wanting to give in. In that hazy chaos, some called out the names of their lovers in life, while others cursed and fought for their dignity. But Rong Jiu was different. Mo Ran knew what this person was like—he loved money and he loved his life; of course, he no longer had a life to love, but he still valued his soul and didn't want to suffer.

On that wide, messy bed, the other unpicked “tributes” around him were all struggling and begging, only Rong Jiu had his eyes closed, mewling softly like a kitten while letting the soldiers manhandle him without complaint.

Looking at his face flushed with arousal, Mo Ran felt a chill in his heart.

He thought of Chu Wanning.

Rong Jiu was soft and pliant, Chu Wanning was firm as steel.

Cold and hard as black iron at first glance, unbending and unyielding. But in a situation like this, Rong Jiu would flatter and fawn to seek favor, would lie back and use his softness to build himself an invulnerable fortress.

As for Chu Wanning?

Mo Ran didn't even have to think about it to know what that person would do—he'd sooner scatter his soul and fall into the Eighteenth Level of Hell than allow someone to touch him.

Running water never breaks, only steel blades do.

BANG!

The sudden noise startled the people in the room as well as the one on the roof.

Mo Ran raised his head to look toward the courtyard, his face blanching.

That woman from before who was fierce as an inferno had been pierced right through the chest by one of the soldiers. Her soul gradually became transparent as tears welled past her eyes.

Then everything froze for a second.

Before dissolving into countless specks.

Her soul had scattered.

The soldier who had destroyed her soul cursed as he stood up. There was a lash mark on his face—the woman had probably wrested his ghost-suppression whip and struck him with it. The soldier spit, “What a fucking wench! Already a ghost and still so damn prissy, bah! Stupid bitch!”

Mo Ran felt like he had fallen into an icy cave.

It was as if the one he saw just now wasn’t that unfamiliar woman, but the choice that Chu Wanning would have picked.

Rong Jiu was still tumbling in bed with those lecherous ghosts. It was a skill he had honed for survival, attaching himself to someone stronger like climbing vines, engulfing them with his softness like a trap.

One by one, the tributes in the room submitted, the stench of sex nauseatingly heavy.

He didn’t know how long had passed before the curtain finally fell on the lurid spectacle.

Rong Jiu really did know how to charm people. One of the soldiers pulled on his clothing and then immediately went to do the registration with his leader. All that was left now was to have the Fourth King look it over, and he’ll be free to bring him home.

These ghost soldiers were subordinates of the Fourth King, and were exempt from the cycle of reincarnation. Although not quite as good as following the Fourth King himself, following these guys would still get him a fairly comfortable life without humiliation.

Rong Jiu was quite content with that.

The soldier who wanted to bring him home flirted with him for a while longer before he had to leave for guard duty. The group of fiends walked away into the distance, leaving the side room in disarray, dreary and cheerless like the aftermath of a feast, leftover wine and sentiments spilt all over the floor, growing cold.

He sat up lazily, the least bothered of the group despite being a man.

He dressed and groomed himself, and then, looking into the copper mirror, felt that his face looked much too pallid in death, compared to the rosy glow he had in life, and didn’t complement his coquettish gazes.

So, ignoring those sobbing, dazed, trembling women, Rong Jiu cheerily straightened out his clothes, put on a pair of silk shoes, and strolled into the courtyard.

Hell had primula flowers as well, of an even deeper red than those found in the world of the living. He picked an umbel of the flowers, dipping the tip of a slim finger into the sap to paint his lips and blush his cheeks.

Everyone had their own priorities. Rong Jiu had led a difficult life since birth; in his eyes, only the well-off, who were high above the rest and didn’t have to worry about going hungry, had the leisure to chase after things like friendship. He was just some dirty thing in the mud, he couldn’t afford to care about integrity

and honor and whatnot. All he had was his life, and now that that was gone, all he had was his soul.

There was a slight rustling sound from behind, like someone had touched the flowers.

He thought the soldier that took a liking to him had doubled back, so he filled his gaze with a generous serving of affection—everything cost money, only affections were free.

He cast a coy glance back, looking exceedingly beautiful and charming, indistinguishable between male and female.

But when he saw who it was standing coldly next to the flowering plant, Rong Jiu recoiled back a step with his eyes wide open and lips slightly parted, like he had been struck by lightning——

“You?!”

“Me,” Mo Ran said.

Rong Jiu’s soft, pretty face flashed through a wild array of expressions; shock, hesitation, gloating, anger, apprehension, feigned nonchalance. And in the end settled on a cold, detached expression.

He was too used to wearing a smile. Those overly intense and ferocious expressions felt heavy on his face; he didn’t feel like carrying them.

“Fancy seeing you here, Mo-gongzi.” The two of them had parted on terrible terms the last time they met. Rong Jiu stood up straight and put on an air of indifference.

Mo Ran said, “I’m looking for someone.”

Rong Jiu seemed to scoff, “Who would’ve thought that a philanderer like Mo-gongzi would be so attached to someone even in death.”

Mo Ran didn’t feel like wasting breath with him. He simply took out the drawing scroll and handed it to Rong Jiu, asking, “Have you seen him?”

Rong Jiu gave the drawing a quick glance and sneered, “Eh, average-looking. Which whorehouse is he from?”

Mo Ran frowned and said, “What do you mean whorehouse, just tell me if you’ve seen him.”

“Nope,” Rong Jiu said indifferently. “Wouldn’t tell you even if I have.”

“.....”

“I’m tired now, gonna go get some rest. Please see yourself out and go back wherever you came from.”

Mo Ran called out to him, “Rong Jiu!”

The slim figure paused, and the pretty face turned a bit, wearing a smug expression. “Yes?”

“I’m going to rescue him. If you want, I’ll rescue you too. This place is ruthless, surely you don’t mean to actually hang around with those soldiers,” Mo Ran said. “Go reincarnate.”

Turning more, Rong Jiu spoke sweetly, “Such words, Mo-gongzi. Sure, this place may be ruthless, but what place isn’t? Rong Jiu lived a difficult twenty years up there, and honestly it’s not much different down here, only my patrons are now ghosts instead of people. What does it matter if I reincarnate or not?”

“...You’d be living under a knife here.”

Rong Jiu burst out laughing. He pulled himself together, still laughing as he glanced Mo Ran over. “When have I *not* lived under a knife? People are knives, I’m just the meat on their chopping block. If I’m lucky and get someone nice, maybe they’ll pay me a little more. But if I get someone ‘extra nice’ like Mo-gongzi, not getting paid is the least of it, with the way you stole from me and then turned around and pretended you didn’t even know me. Mo-gongzi, first you stab me, then you tell me to be careful of knives, how *very* kind of you.”

Author’s Notes:

Today’s Weibo has the adorable Inkstone’s “Dog teasing the big white cat” illustration~it hits where it’s cute, a faceful of blood!

There’s also the adorable Shuanghua stabbing Meatbun with a sword (.....)’s “Dog misses his mother” illustration, it made me cry.....fuck, I felt like got stabbed, the content below is not written by me, it’s written by Shuanghua stabbing Meatbun with a sword!! I’ve typed the words on the illustration here~ at the service of those who going to weibo is inconvenient for--

“Mother, mother! Today, A-Ran managed to eat a lot of desserts that he never got to eat before! Super happy!!

I even got a Shizun! He’s so pretty! There’s also two *shixions*~oh, no, one of them isn’t, he’s my cousin!

I kind of want to kick his teeth in a little! But A-Ran will get along well with him!

Mother...

A-Ran wants to let you taste the desserts we normally don’t get to

Wants to let you see the beautiful Shizun

A-Ran misses you a lot

A-Ran still wants to be with Mother (heart)"

--Shuanghua stabbing Meatbun with a sword

qag Goddammit, this is god-level knifery, this one has lost.

When Dog was younger, he had once set his heart on being someone who did not bear grudges or hatred, who would build houses for all the homeless of the world. But it was also this person, who became a demon whose hands were permanently stained with bloodsheds and sins that he could not wash away. If Dog’s mother had still not reincarnated, and knew of this in the Underworld, she must be very sad.

As for him looking pitiful in yesterday’s update, actually, he isn’t that pitiful, because those were the best days of his first fifteen years of life.

He’d already said so at the beginning of his recollection: back then, at least, he still had his mother.

Afterwards, he no longer had his mother.

Actually, you don't have to intentionally categorise actions as "right or wrong", or people as "good or evil"; some good people will turn evil, and others will crawl from hell back to humanity. A character will have aspects worthy of liking, aspects worthy of hate, aspects worthy of pity; only then can they be realistic. A world can only be complete if there are mistakes, regrets, injustice, and justice.

If a story only contains good characters of the same mold and a single worldview, without emotional conflict or opposing characters and moralities--where the theme song is "The Spring Winds of Re(cough)volution Come A-Sweepin'", where there is universal joy, where everyone is honest and trustworthy, where I'll stay by the roadside for a whole year waiting for the owner of the fifty-cent coin I found to return and claim it--you might as well turn on the television at seven-thirty to watch the very long-running serial drama "Xinwen Lianbo"^[8], your satisfaction guaranteed...

Ch.112 Shizun Is Not To Be Sullied

He was talking about what Mo Ran had done on the first day of his reborn life, when he was full of resentment.

Thinking back to it now, although Rong Jiu had wronged him in the last lifetime, teaming up with Chang-gongzi to scheme against his life, that happened in the past life. The Rong Jiu of this lifetime hadn't yet gone that far with Chang-gongzi, and there really was no way for Mo Ran to explain why he had taken his money and things back then.

"It was my bad." That being the case, Mo Ran didn't want to fight, only saying, "Everything I took from you that day, I'll give back to you in the future."

"How would you do that?" Rong Jiu asked. "Or rather, what good would money and treasures do me now?"

Mo Ran: "....."

"You can give me back the bracelets and pearls, but what about my life?"

"What?" Mo Ran was caught off guard. "Your life?"

"Yes, my life." Rong Jiu's expression clouded over, as if a painful wound in his heart had been touched.

"Do you know how I died?"

"....."

He had probably been holding it in for a long time already, and now that the lid was abruptly lifted, the steam beneath burst out in an uncontrollable stream. He continued on, wretchedly, before Mo Ran could say anything, his expression suddenly one of rage that slowly grew twisted.

"That Chang guy is ruthless. I had no more value to him once you stopped being into me, so he made up some lies about really truly liking me, but his family objects because I'm just a rent boy in a brothel, not clean, and it'd be best if we stopped seeing each other. I was blind back then, thought his feelings were sincere, that he had no choice, that his parents made him... bah! I can't believe I actually fell for his rubbish!"

Mo Ran said, "But what are you blaming me for, shouldn't you blame the Chang dude."

Rong Jiu snapped angrily, "Why shouldn't I blame you? I had enough saved up to buy my freedom, and you stole it all. I was too despondent to stay at the brothel any longer, but I couldn't openly leave without money, so I had to secretly run away. If you hadn't stolen everything from me, I wouldn't have ended up like this!"

"...You ran away?"

"That's right, I ran away. I ran to his place," Rong Jiu said hatefully. "But that Chang guy wouldn't open the door for me, even while the people sent by the brothel were closing in. All my struggles were useless in the end. I got dragged back there, beat up and tormented, and locked back up."

Mo Ran muttered, "But the Chang guy said you went to visit relatives at Butterfly Town and ran into the Ghost Realm barrier breaking, and that's how you died."

"HAH!" There was a thread of mockery on Rong Jiu's androgynous face. "He sure is shameless. Relatives? What relatives could I have at Butterfly Town!"

"....."

"Didn't you say something about living under a knife? Let me tell you what it means to live under a knife!" Rong Jiu got more and more worked up, his features almost twisted, and in this moment, he really did look like a vicious ghost. "Let me tell you just how I died! You and all my other dear patrons! Haha——patrons!"

"I was locked up in the brothel for so long without any food, just being tormented. No one cared if I lived or died. Days passed like that, and I was just about to give up hope when that Chang guy suddenly turned up again, crying and saying that he couldn't let me in that day because his parents were in a bad mood and he was afraid that they'd have the servants beat me to death if he let me in!"

Mo Ran shook his head; it was so obviously a lie. "Surely you didn't believe him."

"No." There was a spot of light quivering in Rong Jiu's eyes. "I believed him."

Mo Ran: "....."

"I believed him." Rong Jiu forced out a smile in the midst of all that resentment, the corners of his mouth twisting. "Why wouldn't I? Doubt is the privilege of those who have a way out. What am I but a flesh peddler? I have to believe whatever people throw out, or else I wouldn't be able to even survive."

He paused before continuing.

"The Chang guy said he'll be true to his word and take me into his home, but that his parents can't accept me just yet, and asked me to go with him to a nearby town and live there for a while first."

"Butterfly Town?"

"Yes. Butterfly Town."

Mo Ran's expression darkened; he already knew where this was going.

Sure enough, Rong Jiu continued, "So I happily packed my things, well actually, there wasn't really much to pack, since you stole everything I earned selling my body all these years, just on a whim. But that's alright, I thought at the time, I have Chang-gongzi now."

“...Heh,” he was silent for a bit, his lips twitching with a snicker, then hatefully spit out the name again, “Chang-gongzi.”

“Did he trick you into going to Butterfly Town and kill you there?”

“...No.” Rong Jiu wore a savage smile as bitterness flickered in his eyes. “It wasn’t him that killed me, it was all of you that blocked off my paths one by one until I had no choice but to go with him on that shady venture. It was all of you, it all of you that killed me.”

Rong Jiu breathed in and continued, “We got to Butterfly Town and I followed the Chang guy into a large manor. It was quiet and empty inside, and there weren’t any servants. He said he hadn’t had a chance to decorate yet, and told me to stay there and rest for a bit while he goes out to buy some stuff. So I stayed and waited, and then a short while later I saw him come back with some man——”

Hearing that, Mo Ran’s expression changed abruptly. “Did you see that man’s face?”

“No,” Rong Jiu said, “He wore a mask and had a cloak on, I couldn’t see his face at all... And then I saw the Chang guy kneel in front of that man, simpering harder than even I do while taking guests. He really should’ve looked in the mirror just then, disgusting. He told that man I had residual wood elemental spiritual essence or something on me, that I’d been intimate with you before—— a good offering. Something like that, who knows, I’m not a cultivator nor do I want to be one, I don’t know what they were talking about.”

But Mo Ran felt his scalp go numb.

It was true that he had been intimate with Rong Jiu before, and so there would be traces of wood elemental spiritual essence remaining in Rong Jiu’s body. That fake Gouchen was looking for a suitable replacement, and although the lingering spiritual energy would’ve been very faint, it nevertheless would’ve been pure, indeed suitable for use in spells.

“There’s not much to say about what happened after that.” There was a bone-chilling coldness in Rong Jiu’s usually easygoing expression. “As Mo-gongzi can see, I died.”

If it had been the Mo Ran of the past life, or the Mo Ran that had just been reborn, he would’ve scoffed and mocked, “So what if you died, what’s that got to do with me?”

But the current Mo Ran couldn’t find it in him to laugh.

He *did* loathe Rong Jiu, and Rong Jiu *was* unscrupulous, and had even gone so far as to plot against his life in the last lifetime. But although he had been physically intimate with Rong Jiu before, they never once had an open, honest talk. To suddenly hear such plain-spoken admissions from Rong Jiu now, down here in the Underworld, Mo Ran felt a hundred mixed emotions.

He mulled it over and decided that there was no way to sort out all these countless threads of bygone things; might as well just let it go.

He sighed and said, “Rong Jiu, I’m sorry about it all.”

Rong Jiu had gone his whole life without anyone ever saying sorry to him. Caught off guard, he looked Mo Ran over with wide eyes like he didn’t recognize him at all before saying, “Even if you say that, I’m still not going to tell you where the person in the drawing is.”

Mo Ran said, “This has nothing to do with the drawing.”

Rong Jiu was quiet for a while, with his head lowered. Then he suddenly spoke, “Mo-gongzi, did you know, Chang-gongzi was plotting with me to kill you and steal your cultivation?”

“I know.”

“You... you know?”

Mo Ran nodded. “I know.”

Rong Jiu stared blankly for a while, then said resentfully, “That Chang guy must’ve rattled me out!”

Then his head snapped back up, eyes flickering with hatred. “If I’d known things were going to end this way, I should’ve just listened to him and killed you. At least then I might have had a good life, instead of dying miserably like this.”

Mo Ran gazed at him. “Do you always do whatever other people tell you to?”

“So what if I do?” Rong Jiu said. “I just wanted to live a good life. For instance, I sold my body, but what’s wrong with that? How is it any different from selling fish or selling meat? It’s just a way to make a living. I know all the young masters like yourself looked down on me, but that didn’t matter. What’s the point in things like reputation and dignity? I’d rather have good wine and good meat. That’s why, if I could’ve saved myself by killing you back then, why wouldn’t I?”

Mo Ran’s lips moved slightly; he was going to make a retort, but then he remembered what he himself had done in the past life, and found that he couldn’t deny what he had said.

Rong Jiu spit angrily, “People kill animals and eat their flesh in order to live, so what’s wrong with killing people in order to live?”

Mo Ran let out a sigh, asking in a murmur, “Is there any meaning in living like that?”

Seemingly directed at Rong Jiu.

But also seemingly directed at his past self, sitting high up on his throne a lifetime ago.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what meaning is,” Rong Jiu said without any feeling. “I was sixteen when I was sold into the brothel, and my first customer was a fifty-something cultivator. I don’t know what it means for something to have meaning. When I was alive, all I wanted was money, I could buy my freedom if I had money, and then I won’t have to bow and simper to other people anymore. But I never got my freedom, even until death, all thanks to you beasts.”

Mo Ran said nothing. A long moment passed before he asked, “So if you could do it over, you’d work together with that Chang guy to kill me?”

“That’s right.”

Mo Ran said, “Alright, then if I could do it over, I’d still turn around and swipe all your money just to screw you over.”

“YOU——!”

Rong Jiu was so angry that the faint blush on his cheeks from the primula flower seemed even more vivid. His body swayed for a while before slowly calming back down.

A few moments passed. Rong Jiu knew he had lost his composure; he reached up to tuck away a few stray strands of hair, then pulled himself together and schooled his features back into his usual coy smile, but anger flickered still in his gaze.

"You can say what you want. I have my own way of living."

"Enjoy your time down here in the Underworld then."

Rong Jiu narrowed his eyes. "I fully intend to. All I have to do is lie back on the bed and I'll be spared the misery of reincarnation for the rest of eternity. I know what a good deal it is, unlike those idiots in the room, I'm more than willing."

Mo Ran's lips tugged in a brief smile. He said, "But Rong Jiu, these people work for the Fourth Ghost King, so whether you get to live, whether you get to stay, it all hinges on his word."

Rong Jiu flinched, then immediately put on his guard, staring at him with those pretty eyes of his.

"What are you trying to say?"

Mo Ran didn't really want to keep quarreling with him like this, if not for the situation being what it was. But although Rong Jiu had a docile temper, he was unrelenting once he began to hate someone, so Mo Ran could only maintain his calm as he spoke, "You may think the person in the drawing is only average, but I think he's great. Everyone has a different eye for beauty, who's to say the Ghost King won't take a liking to him?"

"With frigid looks like those, who'd be into *him*?"

"You never know," Mo Ran said. "If the Ghost King liked the soft type, then why didn't he pick you?"

"....." Rong Jiu fell silent, but his expression darkened somewhat.

Mo Ran pressed, "He has a fierce temper; if he gets picked, he'll probably end up flipping the entire Underworld upside down. Then when the time comes to pin the blame, the Fourth Ghost King's people definitely won't be let off easy—some of these soldiers getting executed is a sure thing. If you wanna make like a climbing vine, at least make sure the tree you climb is sturdy. If the tree topples over when you've only just coiled around it, losing your support would be the least of your concerns, chances are you'll get uprooted alongside, and that'll be a soul-scattering kind of end."

Rong Jiu's already pale face seemed to blanch some more. But he still insisted, coy yet vicious, "I doubt any of that will happen."

Mo Ran: "....."

"Mo-gongzi, let's bet on it. I just can't stand to see you being better off than me."

A few moments passed in silence, and then Mo Ran suddenly became vicious as well, eyes fixed on Rong Jiu as he said, "I'm not betting with you. Rong Jiu, I *will* rescue this person. But if that's how you wanna play, then I'll put my life on the line."

Rong Jiu tilted his head back, something flickering in his gaze as his hand shot out abruptly to press against Mo Ran's chest like a serpent strike, the sting of a scorpion. "Who is he to you? How long have you been lovers for? Longer than with me? Is he better than me in bed? Is it that he knows more tricks, or that he cries out prettier?" He paused, eyelashes slowly drooping. "Mo-gongzi, you're not the kind of lovestruck fool who would risk your life for another; you hold no affection in your heart, you can't fool me."

He barely got to finish before Mo Ran pinched his cheek painfully.

Mo Ran pulled him off of himself, inky black brows inclined and fire glinting in his eyes. "I didn't have a heart before. I do now."

Rong Jiu's eyes snapped up, locked onto his face. He suddenly noticed that this person was scorching hot, and even a little unfamiliar.

The person still seemed to be that free and easy Mo Weiyu, but something seemed different about the soul inside.

Rong Jiu flinched like he had been burned by this kind of Mo Ran. He wanted to turn and run, but was firmly held in place.

"And," Mo Ran said, "between him and I... from here on out, there will be no impropriety. I respect and love him without a single impure thought. Don't you dare sully him."

He shoved Rong Jiu away as he spoke. Rong Jiu knocked into a colonnade, staring incredulously at the person in front of him, too much in disbelief to notice how strangely worded "from here on out, there will be no impropriety" was. If he had his senses then, he would've surely realized the subtle implications behind those words.

No impropriety from here on out meant that there once had been impropriety.

But Rong Jiu didn't catch that.

"He isn't your... isn't your..."

Mo Ran said, "No, he's my Shizun."

Rong Jiu fell silent, but someone like him could always sniff out even the most subtle of sentiments hidden in the words of another, feelings that even Mo Ran himself might not know about, but Rong Jiu could smell it.

He was almost certain that Mo Ran loved the person in the portrait. As someone who never could obtain anyone's affections, he felt bitter jealousy at the thought.

So even the philandering Mo-gongzi would willingly risk life and limb to save a person.

He suddenly wondered, if he had been more sincere toward Mo-gongzi back then, if he had been earnest and wholehearted, then might Mo Ran have also... shown him some real, genuine feelings?

He was still in the midst of wondering when Mo Ran spoke again in a cold, vicious voice without the slightest hint of jest, "Rong Jiu, I will ask you one last time where he is. If you still claim to not know... I'm a cultivator, and there are plenty of drugs and spells to make someone talk. And besides, do you think I won't take the plunge and go see the Ghost King myself?"

Rong Jiu was completely dumbfounded now. "You..."

"I committed all kinds of transgressions all my life, but now I want to lead a proper life. However, if no one will lend me a hand, then I'm still that same Mo Weiyu," he said softly. "Rong Jiu, think it through before you answer. I'm not afraid to die, nor am I afraid of having my soul scattered. If you insist on being obstinate, then I won't hold back either."

Neither spoke for a while.

They stared each other down, the resolute against the resentful, the unshakeable against the unresigned, the fiery against the frosty.

Then the ice in Rong Jiu's eyes melted, like he had been defeated by the wildfire in Mo Ran's oppressive gaze. His envy and hatred ran deep, but Mo Ran's obsession was no shallow thing either. In a face-off like that, he was no match for Emperor Taxian-Jun.

Rong Jiu's face was so ashen that even the vibrancy of the primula flower couldn't cover its gauntness like ruins and wreckage.

"Why would you go this far for him?"

"He treated me the best, but I tormented him like he was my worst enemy. I owe him."

"....."

"I really haven't seen this person," Rong Jiu whispered after a long moment, and then, seeing Mo Ran's expression, slowly added, "I'm not lying. But I do know that all the newly captured ghosts are kept in the biggest hall on the east side, separately locked in small, cage-like rooms with patrolling guards. You should be able to find him there."

Mo Ran wasn't going to wait even a second longer, already turning and rushing off into the night. Rong Jiu stared after him in a daze from where he was rooted in place. Some kind of bitter feeling flooded his chest, and he suddenly yelled toward Mo Ran's back despite himself, "Mo Weiyu, you—you want to lead a proper life now? Who gets to do that! You and I are both people covered in mud! Neither of us gets a do-over for a proper life!!"

"Mo Weiyu! Just you watch, I'm going to live a good life, I'm going to do whatever I have to to cling to life, I'll sell my body and my soul, but I'm going to live lavishly even if my whole body rots away! Just you watch! You think you can just wipe off the smell of blood? You wish! The filth's already in your bones! You can go ahead and play at being reformed, and I'm going to keep whoring, we'll see who gets to live a good life! Mo Weiyu!"

He yelled until even the back of Mo Ran's silhouette was gone from sight. Only then did he drop into a crouch, hands coming up to cover his face as he choked back his sobs.

"How come you get to do things over, how come even someone as rotten as you gets to have someone who treats you well... how come..."

Author's Notes

I know you miss Shizun, Shizun comes online next chapter2333

And...this is not the first time that the novel's title has been flamed, clutches face. This name sounds naturally cute? And doesn't seem to fit the style of the novel?

So I'd like to ask for everyone's opinion, should I change it back to "This Venerable One Has Been Reformed", or just name it "Reformed"? May you all point the way for this useless one who is bad at naming things, thank you! Lies down...

Ch.113 Shizun, Imprisoned

The largest courtyard on the east side was indeed what Rong Jiu said it would be, with three floors in all, room after room. It was the grandest sector, but also the dirtiest and messiest. An old tree drooped by the entrance to the courtyard, and on it sat countless dead crows, each holding a madly-spinning

eyeball between its beak that surveyed the surroundings for anything out of the ordinary.

Two small groups of patrolling ghost soldiers stomped back and forth, guarding the “tributes” that were to be given to the Fourth Ghost King in offering.

Mo Ran hid himself behind a corner, observing the route taken by the ghosts while sizing up the blind spots around the building.

All the lights were on in those small, compartment-like rooms. From time to time, the ghosts inside could be heard weeping or sighing, the sounds mingling and overlapping in the night like an eerie elegy echoed from ancient times, making hairs stand on end.

There were upwards of three hundred rooms in there, and the patrol came around every ten minutes. There was no way he was going to be able to so easily find Chu Wanning in ten minutes, not to mention every floor had a guard by the stairs armed with soul-shattering whips and wearing emergency signal whistles around their necks.

Mo Ran was fretting anxiously when he spotted a lone ghost approaching from the distance. He was dressed in the same uniform as those guards, with a red-on-black token hanging from his waist. Mo Ran scooted a little more into the shadowed area and watched as he walked past right in front of him, coming to a stop at the foot of the stairs.

The ghost exchanged nods with the guard at the stairs. The night was very quiet, so Mo Ran could easily eavesdrop on their conversation.

“Qi-ge, you here to relieve Lao-San?”

“Mhm. You’re almost done your shift too, right?”

“I’m still waiting for next shift’s guy to come, I’m off as soon as he gets here.”

The ghost soldier here to take up his shift went up the stairs. The guard on the first floor yawned in boredom and continued to watch his post in the howling wind.

Seeing this exchange, Mo Ran was suddenly struck by a somewhat risky idea...

From the distance came three sounds of impact: *whack slam thud*.

“*Caw—caw—*” screeched the crows on the branch, like they had seen something out of the norm.

The guard at the entrance snapped to alertness. Looking around, he saw in the thin layer of hazy fog, the silhouette of someone slowly approaching.

Once closer, it turned out to be a young man he had never seen before. The guard grew even more wary.

“Who are you?”

“I’m here to relieve you,” the person said.

The red clouds overhead drifted past, the bright moon above peeking out to illuminate his face—and what a handsome ghost soldier he was.

His facial features were straight and even, charming and naturally expressive. This “ghost” that came to change shifts was none other than Mo Ran.

He was decked out in a set of the ghost soldiers’ armored uniform that he had acquired from god-knows-where, complete with a black-red token swaying at his waist and an emergency whistle dangling by his chest, reflecting a cold silvery light.

"I've never seen you before." The guard challenged.

"I'm new."

The guard put out a hand, unconvinced. "Token?"

Mo Ran untied the token from his waist and handed it over, his expression even and unperturbed despite how tense he actually was inside.

Luckily the guard found nothing strange even after looking the token over several times, front and back, and didn't feel like pressing the matter further, so he clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Then we'll be counting on you for the rest of the night. I'm off."

"Have a safe trip home, Senior."

The ghost cackled a bit, quite pleased by the form of address, and waved his hand. "Good lad, I'll see you around."

"Ah... Senior, one moment please!"

"What is it?" The guard turned to look over his shoulder.

Mo Ran grinned and very casually asked, "How many of the tributes in this batch have the surname Chu?"

The guard countered cautiously, "Why do you ask?"

"Just asking around for Sir Chu of Tailwind Hall," Mo Ran said. "He had a distant relative come down here recently, but Tailwind Hall couldn't find him, so he was wondering if he might be here."

Chu Xun's name carried some weight around these parts as expected; the guard hesitated a bit, but then pointed toward the second floor. "There are three people named Chu in the three innermost rooms up there. You can go take a look."

Mo Ran smiled brightly and said, "Many thanks for the tip, Senior."

"You're welcome." Senior was dumb as fuck. "Matter of course."

That settled, the guard wandered off leisurely, humming a light little tune as he went. He strolled right past the corner without noticing his actual comrade, the one that was supposed to take the next shift, who had been tied up with a binding spell and tossed into a ditch. That poor ghost had been stripped of all his armor and left in only the thin layer of his inner garments. He glared furiously, but was well and thoroughly gagged so that he couldn't make so much as a single sound, and could do nothing but fume uselessly.

Mo Ran didn't trust Rong Jiu to not try and pull something; the unpicked "tributes" were kept collectively in the side palace with only a blocking barrier outside and no guard, but there might still be patrols. With how much Rong Jiu hates him, he'd definitely tell on him if a patrol were to pass by.

There was no time to lose, he had to go fast.

Mo Ran stood there for a while and waited for a group of the walking patrols to pass by, then immediately turned and rushed up to the second floor. The guard on the second floor blocked Mo Ran off with his pike.

"Halt. What are you here for?"

"It's my first day as a guard here, on the first floor."

The guard furrowed his brows. "Then go to the first floor, what're you doing on my floor?"

Mo Ran tried to use Chu Xun as a stepping stone again, but this guard wasn't buying it, and snapped sternly, "So what if it's Tailwind Hall's Sir Chu? Once a person's in this here palace, they belong to the Fourth King. If he wants to rescue his relative, he can go talk to the Fourth King himself, keep me out of it!"

Mo Ran grumbled mentally; this guy seemed to be smarter than the one downstairs. But he could only put on a bold front and say, "It's not like I'm gonna take him away *today*, but at least let me take a look and make sure I haven't got the wrong person?"

"That's easy. Give me the name and I'll look it up, no need for you to go in."

"....." Mo Ran was indescribably vexed, but pushed down his anger to say, "Chu Wanning. His name is Chu Wanning."

The soldier was going to check in the roster, but he set the roster back down as soon as he heard this name.

Mo Ran grew worried at his reaction, asking, "What is it? What's the problem?"

"What's the problem?" The guard repeated his question with a sneer before continuing. "You sure don't know your place, new guy. The Fourth King came by earlier today to see the beauties, and he's sweet on this Chu-xianjun. If not for the fact that it hadn't yet been seven days for him, so his three souls aren't all here and he can't be taken to the Fourth Level of Hell just yet, he would've been given to the Ghost King this very night. You want *him*? What do you *think* the problem is."

Mo Ran's face was already blue halfway through, and he didn't speak until quite a while after the guard finished talking, "The Fourth Ghost King fancies him?"

"So?"

"...Nothing. Nevermind then, sorry to bother." Mo Ran turned around sullenly and took two steps down the stairs. Then, before the other could even react, holy weapon Jiangui had appeared in his hand as he spun around and wrapped it tightly around the guard's neck!

Piercing scarlet flashed through the air.

Holy weapons could maim ghosts and gods alike; that guard only had time to see scarlet willow leaves fly past before his eyes and hear the newcomer say angrily, "What makes you think I wouldn't fight the Ghost King for him!" before he lost consciousness and crumpled to the floor.

Mo Ran lifted his hands and cast a spell to tie him up and seal his lips before kicking him to the side, then ran hurriedly toward the end of the hallway.

The three rooms at the end of the hall all held souls with the surname Chu.

Mo Ran wasn't sure how, but he seemed to know in his heart, so much so that even he himself didn't stop to wonder just why he had such a peculiar feeling before he pushed the door open. He stood in front of the second room, slightly out of breath from how fast he ran.

He panted; a strand of inky black hair fell in front of his eyes, but he paid it no mind, eyes fixed inside the room——

Everything was just as Rong Jiu said.

It was a small room the size of an animal cage, with drab, ashen walls the color of death.

But the person inside seemed so very warm, like a flame in the cold, endless white.

Not every “tribute” was tied up, or at least Chu Wanning wasn’t. Maybe because the Fourth King already had his sights set on him and the guards didn’t dare displease him, but there was even a snow-white animal pelt on the floor, thick and soft like a layer of fresh snow in the depth of winter.

Chu Wanning was asleep on the fur rug. He was the kind of person who appeared resolute and undaunted, but was, truthfully, always a little uneasy deep inside. This manifested itself most evidently in his sleep—he always slept curled up, shrinking into himself to be smaller.

As if he was trying to keep himself warm, but also as if he was afraid of taking up someone else’s space. Like this, he looked frail and a little pitiful.

This soul wasn’t like the Human Soul; there were no bloodstains on his handsome face, and the clothes he wore were different too. He was dressed in vibrant red silks the color of sunset, loose-fitting with broad sleeves, and richly patterned with the imagery of coiling dragon and soaring phoenix, of dancing golden butterflies.

Mo Ran practically stumbled forward, dropping to his knees next to Chu Wanning and reaching out with trembling hands to caress his face.

“Wanning...”

The utterance that slipped out wasn’t Shizun, but the name he had called him by during those final days of his past life.

Those twisted days of hatred and entanglement, suffused into his very being.

He lifted Chu Wanning into his arms, but it was a while before the drowsy man awakened.

When Chu Wanning opened his eyes, he found himself lying in Mo Ran’s embrace. The look of concern on the young man’s face, on those features that had yet to fully mature, was an expression the likes of which he’d never seen before. He furrowed his brows, thinking that perhaps this was some kind of dream, and after a moment, sighed and closed his eyes once more.

“Shizun!”

Someone called by his ear.

It wasn’t “Wanning” this time.

“Shizun! Shizun!”

Chu Wanning’s phoenix eyes shot open, and although his expression didn’t really change, he was betrayed by the minute trembling of his fingertips.

In the next instant, Mo Ran took hold of his hand and pressed it against his own face, laughing and crying at the same time until his handsome features were a sorry-looking mess.

“Shizun,” he choked back a sob as he gazed unblinkingly at him, repeating the word over and over like he had forgotten how to say anything else, “Shizun...”

Chu Wanning finally came back to his senses where he was clutched tightly in Mo Ran’s arms. Subconsciously feeling that it was improper, he struggled free of Mo Ran and sat up to glare at him.

He stared blankly for a long while without a single word.
Then suddenly flew into a rage.

Before Mo Ran could even react, Chu Wanning had already jerked his hand away and turned to land a backhanded slap to his face, scowling furiously.

“You idiot! How did you die too?!”

Mo Ran opened his mouth and was just about to explain when he saw, in the haziness of the moonlight, that beneath all that anger, the eyes under Chu Wanning’s long lashes were subdued and sorrowful, as if unresigned, as if there was a teariness there that might shatter at the slightest touch. He bit down hard on his lower lip when he finished cursing, forcefully holding back the shameful, humiliating tightness in his throat.

There were those who would flaunt the tiniest cut, make sure everyone knew they’d been injured.

And then there were those who were too proud to say, who would rather swallow their grievance and suffering, even if it ripped their throats bloody, than to speak a word of it.

He never said, so Mo Ran never knew before.
But his heart ached terribly now that he knew.

He wanted to hold Chu Wanning.
But Chu Wanning pushed him away, voice hoarse as he said, “Get the hell out.”

Chu Wanning turned his face away, hiding a thousand layers of heartbreak under a single layer of stiff coldness.

“You have some nerve, coming to see me after dying so young.”

“Shizun...”

“Out.” Chu Wanning’s face turned away even more. “You’re no disciple of mine, I don’t take anyone so useless as to end up dead in his prime.”

Dead in his prime...

Mo Ran had originally been feeling dejected, but after being reprimanded by him all seriously like this, he suddenly felt warmth flood his heart like the trickling of spring waters. He raised a hand and clapped his forehead before sliding it down to cover his eyes, and then, unable to help himself, started laughing in a mixture of bitter and sweet and sour.

Chu Wanning grew even angrier at the light sound of his laughter, whipping his head around to chide sternly, “What’re you laughing about, you——” He made to slap Mo Ran again in a fit of rage, but Mo Ran caught his hand.

The young man’s gentle eyes blinked, slowly, and then, without saying anything, he solemnly brought Chu Wanning’s hand to press against his own chest.

Author’s Notes:

The big white cat that is finally released: [thanking jjwxc readers]
The rescue canine that failed the passing criteria: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Ch.114 Shizun, Say You Will

Thump, thump, thump.
A slow, steady heartbeat.

Chu Wanning blinked, surprise, joy, awkwardness, and embarrassment flitting across his eyes in an instant. But Yuheng Elder was Yuheng Elder after all, calm and cool as ever, more adept than anyone else at schooling his features into one of unruffled composure, sweeping those excess emotions under the rug in no time at all like the one that was admonishing Mo Ran in despair just now wasn't him.

"What're you doing down here if you're not dead."
Chu Wanning regretted it as soon as the words left his mouth.

It was obvious that Mo Ran had come to save himself. But Chu Wanning was afraid his heart might beat right out of his chest if Mo Ran were to actually say that to him.

He was so nervous that he completely forgot he was already dead, and had no heart to speak of.

But Mo Ran only gazed at him without saying any such thing.

He probably knew that Chu Wanning would be embarrassed if he were to say "I came here for you".

So he thought for a bit, then pressed his lips together and asked gently with lowered lashes, "Shizun, take a guess why I'm down here?"

"...You came looking for trouble."

"Since when did Shizun change his name to trouble?" Mo Ran grinned.
"Should've told me."

Chu Wanning jerked his hand back, as if stung by this gentleness that he's never had before, snapping in embarrassed anger, "What nonsense, how impudent."

Mo Ran had found out a secret.

He had found out that Chu Wanning's anger was a mask. He was just so awkward that he'd rather wear that menacing, colorful mask to hide all of the gentleness, happiness, joy, embarrassment, and sadness beneath.

What a dummy.

Chu Wanning was a dummy, wearing that mask all his life like it's not exhausting.

He was a dummy too, taking two whole lifetimes to figure that out.

The mood was a bit lighter now, after that. And rebirth was finally within reach now that he had found all four of Chu Wanning's souls.

Mo Ran was in high spirits. He grabbed Chu Wanning's hand again, not letting go as he rambled on and on, telling him about why he had come down to the Underworld, about Master Huaizui, and when it came to certain things, he had to stop and wait for the tightness in his throat to go away before continuing with red-rimmed eyes. And as he explained, the words that appeared the most were "I'm sorry".

Chu Wanning didn't know what to say.

He was good to others, but he didn't do it to get anything out of them, and he was also afraid that they'd feel troubled or indebted to receive his goodwill.

In truth, he was afraid that he'd offer up his warm, beating heart to someone, only for that person to casually set him aside to cool.

That was why he would always hide his kind deeds, though he was otherwise an open and straightforward person.

He had worn a mask his whole life.

But one day, the person he liked suddenly reached out and took that vividly drawn anger right off his face, leaving him like a crab without its shell.

He stood there in a daze, at a complete loss for what to do.

Mo Ran knelt down before him while he stared blankly, one hand still holding onto his, as if afraid he might disappear.

For a split second, ridiculous, shameful thoughts raced through his mind.

This disciple of his had always been brazenly audacious with no regard for common sense. For Mo Ran to suddenly take his hand and treat him like this, he couldn't help thinking the other was about to pull something.

"....." Startled by his own thought, his face darkened even more, and, not knowing what kind of expression to wear, he could only fall back on the cool detachment he was so used to.

But Mo Ran didn't pull anything. He only continued to hold his hand, like he was holding a treasure, once lost, now regained.

This person whom he had tossed aside like a worthless piece of junk in his past life.

"Shizun."

Having set down all that hatred, he knelt before him now, earnestly, respectfully, full of warmth.

"I was wrong before. From now on, I'll go left if you say left, right if you say right; all I want is for you to be happy." Maybe it was too many emotions all at once, but Mo Ran's eyes grew watery even as he kept smiling. "So come back with me, okay?"

Chu Wanning said nothing; his face was expressionless like still water, but his heart burned like a beacon of fire.

"Shizun."

His voice was gentle and soft, with a touch of lingering youthfulness.

When Mo Ran hated someone, it was with unadulterated vehemence.

But if he were to cherish someone, it was with his whole heart.

He had always been extreme like that.

"Come back with me, say you will, okay?"

Chu Wanning was still not responding, only staring blankly at him as if thinking about something or another.

Mo Ran worried that he might be upset, so he forced himself to keep smiling despite the dejection he felt, tried his best to hold it together so as to not make Shizun uncomfortable. He swung their joined hands a little, coaxing, "Or Shizun can just nod."

"....."

And then, afraid he might not nod, Mo Ran thought for a bit and added, "I'll count to three, okay?"

“.....”

“If Shizun doesn’t say anything, I’ll take it as a yes, ‘kay?” Mo Ran said, nervous but still gentle, and paused before slowly counting off.

“One, two, three.”

But Chu Wanning was like a person frozen for too long; to be suddenly put into warm water, what he felt wasn’t warmth, but pain.

He had never been wanted before, so he didn’t feel anything, even frozen. But now that there was someone to treasure him, to surround him with warmth, it was as if he finally had the right to feel pain, and suddenly every inch of his body hurt, and every inch of his skin cracked.

Only now did he feel the pain.

The tips of his fingers trembled faintly in Mo Ran’s palms that were getting more and more sweaty.

Mo Ran grew even more anxious when he didn’t reply, afraid that he had lost heart and did not want to return to the living world.

But he didn’t dare move, afraid that Chu Wanning would disappear and leave him behind if he moved so much as a single muscle. He smiled warmly and tried again, “I counted too fast, you probably weren’t ready yet. I’ll count again.”

“One, two, three.”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran’s throat moved. He started trembling as he forced himself to keep smiling, saying, practically begging, “Shizun, did you hear me?”

There finally seemed to be some focus in Chu Wanning’s phoenix eyes, but they were still mostly blank, fixed on Mo Ran’s face without any expression.

“I’ll count again, slower this time in case it’s hard to hear,” Mo Ran said. “One, two, three.”

“.....”

“I’m going to count one last time...”

“One, two, three.”

“This time’s really the last.”

“One, two, three...”

Chu Wanning stared, as if emotionless, at that person kneeling in front of him counting one-two-three, one-two-three, again and again like a dummy, as if repeating it over and over like that could make time flow backwards, could make a withered tree bloom again, could bring back the dead.

The disciple before him counted with all that he had, clumsily and stubbornly, like he was counting his own sins, counting all the ways that his Shizun had been good to him.

Counted until his voice trembled and his smile was one of panic.

“Shizun.”

Mo Ran looked up; the rims of his eyes were red, but he had already done Chu Wanning so much wrong that he’d ended up like this, so he didn’t want to

cry in front of him when he could see and hear, didn't want to cause Shizun any more grief.

So he swallowed his tears and kept smiling, talking in a light, easy tone, as if bargaining.

"I'll count again; pay attention to me, won't you?"

Chu Wanning felt like his heart was being stabbed by his pleading. He tried to pull his hand from Mo Ran's grip, like he was frightened.

But Mo Ran held tightly onto him this time, refusing to let go. With a dog-like persistence, the young man gazed steadily, unblinkingly at him.

He said, "One, two, ..."

Suddenly, there was the sound of rapid footsteps from the outside, along with yelling and cursing. Chu Wanning's head snapped up; he saw a sea of lights swarming in the distance as a vast army of ghost soldiers closed in, headed straight for where they were.

Rong Jiu had found a chance to snitch on them, after all.

"There! Upstairs! Upstairs!"

"Grab that thief!"

"Who does he think he is!"

Everywhere was tumultuous, frenzied chaos, the flickering shadows of ghosts and torches rolling in like a tide from afar to devour them, obliterate them, plunge them into the Infinite Hells for the rest of eternity.

But Mo Ran didn't even turn around; in that moment, holding Chu Wanning's hand, he felt at peace.

Chu Wanning was not his lover, but he was his beloved, respected person, was someone who loved him and was good to him. His heart was calm, looking at him.

Chu Wanning admonished him, "Have you lost your mind?! What're you doing still sitting there!"

He turned his hand to grip Mo Ran's and pull him up as he spoke; his eyes were bright in the light of countless torches, looking just like they had in life. Chu Wanning snapped angrily with a scowl, "Let's go already!"

Mo Ran seemed surprised. "We're going?"

Chu Wanning was getting really mad. "Who else?!"

Trembling, Mo Ran closed his eyes, opened them again, and then suddenly smiled. It was a brilliant smile, eyes brimming with tears like beautiful, dew-laden blossoms.

He finally, finally let out the breath he'd been holding as he clasped their hands tightly together.

Fingers interlocked.

Pressing his forehead against Chu Wanning's, he whispered quietly, earnestly, "Three."

"What do you mean three! Hurry up!"

The countless ghosts outside were drawing close; only then did Mo Ran turn around to look, letting out a somewhat panicked sound when he saw the horde

closing in. “Shizun, put up a barrier to hold them off for a bit while I get you into the Soul-Calling Lantern!”

“Can’t.”

“...Wha?!” Mo Ran was dumbstruck.

Chu Wanning’s cool, collected expression was a little flustered, and he snapped to cover the embarrassment with anger, “Did you really think I’d be trapped in this stupid little cage if I still had my powers?!”

“.....”

Alright then.

So the thing that was missing from this soul was “cultivation”.

He had to recite a spell without interruption in order to draw a soul into the Soul-Calling Lantern. It wouldn’t take too long, but it was definitely not happening with the way things were right now, so Mo Ran could only grab Chu Wanning and run for it.

Chu Wanning may have lost his cultivation, but at least he still had his martial arts skills and could easily keep up with Mo Ran. The two of them beat a hasty retreat, pursued by a torrential stream of ghost soldiers. Chu Wanning asked, when they made it to the door of the main hall, “Where are we going?”

Mo Ran: “Dunno.”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

But Mo Ran only pointed at the towering palace walls, not at all discouraged. “Let’s get up there and scope out the place.”

Luckily, Chu Wanning had a solid foundation in light footwork, and could vault up walls no problem even without the aid of his cultivation. Landing gracefully on the eaves, he looked down to see the swarm of angry ghosts roaring closer, and quickly instructed Mo Ran, “Summon Jianguil!”

Mo Ran did as told, a strand of piercing scarlet radiance appearing between a swipe of his palms and springing forth like a hissing snake, willow leaves vibrant and rustling as the holy weapon settled into a coil by his feet.

“Channel your spiritual energy past Wuli, through Quchi, and converge on Shangyang^[9], then whip downwards.”

THRASH!

Chu Wanning seemed to suddenly remember something, adding, “Not too much spiritual energy.”

Mo Ran faltered at his words, but it was already too late to pull back the strike.

There was a loud *BOOM!* as fiery explosions shot forth from the hissing snake the very instant it was flung out, like a fire-spitting dragon roaring in fury as it pierced through the torrential dead. The raging inferno blazed through practically the entire corridor, the flames moving the stars themselves, smoke rising beyond the clouds, and the dozens of soldiers in the forefront were scorched into smithereens in a mere instant, along with the walls and trees!

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran: “.....”

“Didn’t I say to not use too much spiritual energy!” Chu Wanning scolded with a frown.

“By the time you said that I was already...” Suddenly remembering that he must be respectful and not talk back to Shizun, Mo Ran shut his mouth disgruntledly and said instead, “Shizun is right to scold me.”

“Forget it,” Chu Wanning flicked his sleeve. “I did say it a little late.”

Mo Ran was taken aback——so all he had to do to get Shizun to cave was to take the blame himself first?

He blinked, then couldn’t help bursting into laughter.

Chu Wanning glared at him. “What’s so funny? Get moving already.”

Author’s Notes:

Haha, thank you for your suggestions, friends~ If the urge to change the novel’s title comes someday, I would most likely change it to “This Venerable One Has Been Reformed”. If I change it, don’t exit out of the update and not recognise me2333~

Ch.115 Shizun is Already Married

“Let’s go let’s go,” Mo Ran responded, then suddenly looked worried as he thought of something. “Shizun, I killed so many ghost soldiers, the Underworld’s probably not gonna let us off easy.”

“It’s fine,” Chu Wanning said. “That technique just now doesn’t actually scatter the opponent’s soul, only shatters it. They’ll piece themselves back together in a couple of days.”

Mo Ran took a closer look, and sure enough there were specks of souls floating about the smoldering, charred remains, glowing like fireflies. But before he could investigate further, he was already being pulled along by Chu Wanning with a, “Run.”

Another wave of furious soldiers was rushing in from behind the crumpled walls like a horde of rampaging beasts. Chu Wanning and Mo Ran sped along the tiled rooftops, Mo Ran asking while running, “Shizun, since they don’t even die, we won’t really offend the Underworld that much, so why not just let me pour in more spiritual energy and beat them all back?”

Chu Wanning replied sardonically, “Why don’t you try using it again.”

Mo Ran had no idea what for, but tried it nonetheless. To his surprise, all that came out this time was a tiny wisp of smoke; Jiangui seemed extremely worn out, with none of that impressive sun-swallowing, mountain-crushing might from earlier.

“The more spiritual energy you use, the longer the recovery time,” Chu Wanning instructed. “So refrain from excess, understood?”

“Got it.”

Mo Ran paused before speaking again.

“Shizun. I suddenly remembered something, wanna guess what it is?”

“What?”

“I remembered back at the Peach Blossom Springs, in the illusion, when you taught me how to use the willow vine, just like this. You were really short back then.” Mo Ran grinned toothily and gestured with his hand. “Didn’t even reach my waist.”

Chu Wanning stumbled.

“Careful!”

“Get lost.” Chu Wanning’s ears would’ve turned red by now if he was still alive. He snapped in an anger born of embarrassment, “Comparing heights with Xia Sini? Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, like me?”

Mo Ran grinned and didn’t take the bait. He *was* taller now, no longer visibly shorter than Shizun like he had been back at Butterfly Town, but he was still only about even with him.

He stole a sidelong glance toward his Shizun and made a mental note to go compare heights with Chu Wanning in a couple more years, once this body of his was done growing.

While Emperor Taxian-Jun schemed away over here, Yuheng of the Night Sky was feeling rather complicated over there.

Although he was already pretty sure that Mo Ran knew that Xia Sini was him at this point, actually hearing him say that was still a humiliating ordeal for his thin face.

After all... he had looked up at Mo Ran and called him “shi-ge”.

The more he thought about it, the more mortified and incensed he felt; Chu Wanning ran faster and faster, leaving Mo Ran to catch up.

Knowing what was going through his head, Mo Ran let him run ahead, keeping a half pace behind. Fleeing from the pursuers with the wind blowing in their face, he looked at the man in front of him, just within reach, red robes fluttering like the drifting leaves of maple and the ember clouds at dusk, with golden embroidered butterflies that look almost alive as they glimmered.

He suddenly felt a bittersweet contentment.

In that moment, he was grateful. Grateful that he could still see Chu Wanning, grateful that he could still receive his guidance as before.

And in a few more years, if everything goes smoothly, he’d be able to lo his head with a smile and tease Chu Wanning, “This disciple has come to compare heights with Shizun—this disciple will stand right here, Shizun can stand on tiptoe if he wants.”

His heart felt warm; the Heavens were truly kind to him.

Not everyone had the chance to redo things after committing wrongs, and not everyone could forgive and let go after being hurt.

His Shizun was so warm beneath that cold exterior, but it had taken him so long to see that.

They fended off two more waves of pursuers. The main gate of the palace was within sight now.

Glancing back, he saw the pursuing soldiers far back in the dust with no chance to catch up. Mo Ran exhaled in relief, but he hadn’t even finished letting out the breath when there was a sudden clap of thunder in front.

A massive sedan chair appeared from within the fiery lightning, carried evenly upon the shoulders of eight big, brawny men kneeling on the ground. Reclining languidly on the sedan chair was a man, rather on the plump side of things, wrapped in snowy beast furs with his long hair draping loosely and a beauty on each arm, one massaging his shoulder while the other fed him cherries.

This big-bellied man might be a soul, but he had already cultivated a corporeal form, so the fruits were actually being consumed, rather than just passing through for a taste.

Licking his lips, the man grabbed one of the beauties by the jaw and planted a big sloppy kiss before leisurely glancing up at Chu Wanning and Mo Ran with a sneer.

"Is some hooligan actually trying to steal this king's little darling? Well now, this simply won't do."

He said, leisurely.

"Aren't you quite the bold little cultivator, hm?"

Chu Wanning's expression was dark and his face so pale it was blue.

To have gotten called "little darling" by this greasy lecher ghost right in front of Mo Ran... if he still had his powers, Tianwen would've already turned this bastard into mince by now.

Mo Ran's expression didn't look much better, but he was well aware that he couldn't protect Chu Wanning while facing off against a ghost king at his current level of cultivation, so he could only try for diplomacy.

He stepped up and cupped his fist respectfully as he said, "My lord, apologies for all the damage to your palace, but I will be taking this person."

"Oho, is that up to you, now?" The Fourth Ghost King smirked. "What do you think that is that he's wearing? I'll tell you, that's called a ghost marriage gown, so in other words, the ceremonial robes of the Underworld. Now that he's been clothed in my ceremonial robes, he belongs to me and won't be able to set so much as a foot outside the gates of this palace. Go on and try it if you don't believe me."

He paused, then added, "And if you try to forcibly bring him out anyway, the spiritual energy on those robes will shatter your souls at the gate. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Mo Ran suddenly realized why Chu Wanning wasn't restrained despite Rong Jiu saying that everyone at the main palace was tied up. So these red robes on him...

Hands clenching into fists, Mo Ran said, "Of course I'll make it up to you for taking him. Whatever my lord wants, I'll do my utmost to provide."

"This king only wants beauties—not the gentle, obedient kind; those have gotten rather boring as of late. This king likes exactly the type standing right there next to you, all icy and standoffish, got more flavor that way."

"....."

Intrigued by the look on Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's faces, the Fourth King sat up leisurely and said, "To be honest with you though, this is the first time in all my years here in the Underworld that someone's busted into my palace to raise havoc like this, so I'm pretty curious—just who are you to him?"

Mo Ran answered, "He's my Shizun."

"Oh, that's it?" The Ghost King laid his hand out with an amused grin. "And here I thought it was some kind of life or death relation."

Mo Ran said, "...What's the point in forcibly keeping him when he doesn't like you."

The ghost king gave a lazy wave of his hand. "Foolish child, liking or not liking is irrelevant. It's his body that this king is after, not his heart."

"....."

"And besides," the ghost king continued with a sneer, "so what if he doesn't like me? It's not like he likes you. If you two were already wedded though, then it'd be a different story. This king fancies beauties, but has no interest in secondhand goods. But too bad for you, he's only your Shizun."

Mo Ran was stunned at first, but then suddenly smiled.

"My lord means it?"

"This king is the master of the Fourth Level of Hell, what would be the point in lying to a little no-name ghost like you?"

"Then let me ask this: if my Shizun was indeed already married, then would the ceremonial robes still have any effect?"

"Of course not. This king never cared to play with other people's husbands and wives." The Fourth Ghost King furrowed his brows. "Why do you ask? Is your Shizun already married?"

Chu Wanning cared about face. "No."

Mo Ran didn't care about face. "Yup."

Fourth Ghost King: "....."

Before Chu Wanning could say anything else, Mo Ran had already grabbed his hand, pulling him along toward the gate. He looked over his shoulder toward the Fourth Ghost King as he walked, saying, "Don't mind him, my lord, Shizun's memory is bad. Anyway, like you just said, the ceremonial robes won't do anything if he's already married, so let's not waste any breath over it, I'll just go ahead and take him outside. If we successfully walk out, then please let us go. If I lied, then I'll get what's coming."

Chu Wanning protested, "Mo Ran——have you lost your mind? That was just an act, back at Butterfly Town, it doesn't count——"

"Why wouldn't it count," Mo Ran said confidently without the slightest hint of hesitation. "We drank the wine and did the bows, with ancestors above and the earth below, why wouldn't it count."

"Mo Ran...!"

To suddenly bear witness to such a quarrel after thousands of dull, monotonous years here in the Underworld, the ghost king was rather amused, settling into his chair and propping his cheek in one hand to watch with interest. He patted the thigh of the beauty next to him for her to feed him more fruit, chewing as he said, "Sure thing, go ahead. I won't keep you guys if you make it out fine, and if you die, that's on you."

Mo Ran said, "Many thanks."

There was a barrier over the main gate of the palace that flickered with a faint purple light, clearly for keeping the souls inside. The closer Chu Wanning got to that barrier, the more unwilling he grew. There was no way some half-baked ghost marriage like that would count...

But Mo Ran leaned in close just then, saying in a quiet voice, "Don't worry, Shizun, our marriage is definitely valid."

"Valid how?!"

"Just listen to me this one time, I know what I'm doing here." He laced their fingers and squeezed, though his own palm was covered in sweat.

"And even if luck is not on our side, I'll be right here with Shizun."

Chu Wanning flinched and opened his phoenix eyes wide, staring at him in astonishment like he'd never seen him before.

Mo Ran beamed brightly at him, dimples deep and warm. "I owe Shizun far too much already. This time, I won't leave Shizun by himself."

"....." Chu Wanning was silent for a long moment before softly muttering, "Why do all that?"

"Then what about Shizun? Why did you do all that?"

Chu Wanning's eyelashes drooped, then he let out a quiet sigh and stopped fighting it. They stood hand in hand before the crackling purple barrier, with a mass of ghosts gathering behind to watch the show.

"Let's go?"

"Let's go."

There was no telling who tightened the grip first, squeezing so firmly, the freezing cold over the scalding warmth, the clammy wrapping around the dry, the pale white against the wheat-colored.

Blazing inferno and roaring thunder surged before them.

The barrier was like an enormous flood, a gigantic waterfall. They stepped in at practically the same time, and the tremendous current of firey lightning surged towards them, crashing down with a might that could swallow mountains and rend rivers, threatening to tear apart this pair of people so bold as to step outside the gate of life and death in the very next second, rip them into shreds, burn them into dust.

The firey lightning flared with a light so blindingly bright it was practically white.

It was but a split second away from striking the two of them. Mo Ran had already made up his mind before to respect and love his Shizun, to never again disobey him, much less sully him with any untoward thoughts.

But in that moment, in the uncertainty of life or death, he suddenly whipped his head around, wanting to get one more look at Chu Wanning's face.

Only to be met with Chu Wanning's gaze on him as well, amidst the deluge of sparks that rained down all around them.

Those phoenix eyes had once been fierce, resolute, pained, resentful, enduring... but in this moment, they held a tranquility before the end.

And—he wasn't sure if he was imagining it—

And deep affection.

Mo Ran had never seen such a look in Chu Wanning's eyes before; there was a loud rumbling in his head like countless cities collapsing at once, and his chest was suddenly flooded with burning affection, bursting forth to emerge from

a thick layer of ashen black earth. He didn't even have the time to contemplate just what kind of feeling this was, overwhelmed as he was by the searing heat in his heart and the boiling of his blood.

Between the flashes of lightning and crashing of thunder, he reached out without thinking and pulled Chu Wanning into a tight embrace.

Frenzied heartbeats against quivering soul.

Chest to chest.

Truth be told, before coming down here to the Underworld, something like dying together with Chu Wanning had never crossed his mind. He had always thought that the one he loved was Shi Mei, so if he were to die together with someone, it would be with Shi Mei.

But, when truly faced with the prospect of dying.

He had instinctively pulled him into his arms, as if trying to merge his flesh into his own, hide his soul within his own.

Chu Wanning.

I'm with you.

I...

"Aiyah, who would've thought, you two really *are* star-crossed lovers." An amused voice drifted languidly over. "This king actually got the wrong ghost? This xianjun really is already married?"

Mo Ran's eyes snapped open.

The lightning and thunder that had been hellbent on tearing them into pieces mere moments ago had turned into countless dandelions while he wasn't looking, dancing and drifting lightly all around them like so many snowflakes.

The Fourth Ghost King stood up with a smile, clapping slow and leisurely where he stood near the palace gate. "It's been hundreds of humdrum years, and that was a good show."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran was still in a stupor, feeling dazed as he looked at the Fourth Ghost King then turned to look at the person in his arms, before being hit with a sudden realization about the impropriety of holding his Shizun like this and hurriedly withdrawing his hands. Chu Wanning also seemed to jolt back to reality, turning his face away with an unreadable expression.

A moment passed, then he straightened out his robes and stood silently at the side.

Trying to ease the awkwardness, Mo Ran lifted his head toward the Fourth Ghost King to say, "See, I didn't lie to my lord, right?"

"You certainly did not."

The Fourth Ghost King shook his head with something that's almost a smile but not quite.

"Day after day, it's been a long time since I've been so entertained. Alright, I'll let you two go, if only for the amusing spectacle you provided. This king has no shortage of beauties anyway, I won't miss an already-married soul."

Mo Ran is delighted to hear that, thinking to himself that this Fourth Ghost King was much more magnanimous than the Fifth Ghost King that Chu Xun had encountered. Sure he's a lecher, but at least he keeps his word, got some of that lordly air.

Thinking thus, he turned to leave with Chu Wanning in tow.

But just then, the clouds above scattered and the light of the moon shone on Mo Ran, silently casting a dark shadow at his feet.

The Fourth Ghost King didn't react right away, still grinning and quite pleased with the rare diversion he had just been treated to. He turned and gestured to the beauty at his side to feed him a grape.

The beauty peeled the fruit of its dark purple skin and held the succulent, translucent flesh to the Fourth Ghost King's lips. The Fourth Ghost King was just about to open his mouth when he suddenly realized that something was off, and his head whipped back around with a fierce, "HOLD IT!"

He stared at the shadow on the ground, then his gaze moved up slowly, inch by inch, until it was fixed on Mo Ran's face.

"...Why don't you take a look at what that is on the ground?"

Looking down, Mo Ran abruptly discovered that there was actually a blurry shadow at his feet!

The Fourth Ghost King's lax, whimsical expression disappeared at once and his already long and narrow eyes narrowed further, flickering with something like that of a vulture just about to swoop toward its prey.

"How exactly did a living person like yourself get into Hell?"

Ch.116 Shizun Meets Rong Jiu

The moment Chu Wanning saw light gathering in the Ghost King's hand, he immediately shoved Mo Ran and said, "Run!"

There was no need to tell him twice. Mo Ran grabbed Chu Wanning's elbow and they fled towards the palace doors, leaping and bounding through the air.

As they ran, Mo Ran cursed, "Master Huaizui's spell is too careless, how could he have left me with a shadow, letting people see through me!"

For some reason, even though he was hearing his own disciple curse his own master, Chu Wanning barely showed any reaction and only threw Mo Ran a glance. He looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end nothing left his lips.

"Trying to escape?" The Fourth Ghost King snorted. "As if I'd let you off that easy."

They were both experts at qinggong, and seeing the palace doors about to completely close, they stepped onto the wall, leaping off. But at that same moment, the Fourth Ghost King summoned lightning into his palm. With a swing of his hand, thunder roared in the skies and lightning crashed down upon the palace doors. In a split second, the palace walls that were only ten meters high before shot up into the sky, extending so high they looked like they were about to connect to the heavens.

And the palace doors were also rapidly shutting, locking them in from all around.

Mo Ran cursed under his breath, and dragged Chu Wanning along with him as they turned and ran in another direction. If they couldn't exit through the palace doors then they'd leave it for now; the priority was to avoid getting captured by the Fourth Ghost King.

But this just so happened to be the right move. Every king of the Ghost Realm had their own expertise as well as their own shortcomings; while the Fourth Ghost King was powerful in spells, after thousands of years of debauched indulgence, his physical condition really couldn't be compared to the others. Never mind running a mile, just fifty steps and he'd be gasping for breath.

The Fourth Ghost King had lazed about for thousands of years, holding fast to the principle of lying down if he didn't need to sit, and sitting down if he didn't need to stand. After so long, he'd long lazed himself to the point that his qinggong was trash.

His outrage grew as he watched Chu Wanning and Mo Ran run further and further away. However, because he'd often gone to the other kings' domains in hell to gather up beauties, his relationship with the other eight kings was considerably not great. So even when something like this happened, he was reluctant to inform the other kings in order to work together to capture them.

"So what if you can run fast! This king may be full-bellied, but there's still no escaping my grasp!" The Fourth Ghost King rubbed at his belly, angry and aggrieved. He turned, and saw the eight staunch men who had been holding him up on their shoulders standing there, unmoving, and became even more displeased. "What are you all standing around for? This king's legs are precious, not meant to give chase, but why aren't any of *you* giving chase?"

"....."

This Fourth Ghost King was said to have been a handsome man when he was skinny, but because he'd been deprived of mortal pleasures for too long, once he cultivated a flesh body he overindulged in food and drink. He ate while sitting, ate while walking, ate while crouching. Even at hell's busiest times, when he had to rush out appeals and didn't even have enough time to write, he still needed attendants at either side, not to flatten papers or grind ink, but to slice fresh fruit and feed him pastries.

Just like that, a perfectly fine and peerless beauty forcibly stuffed himself into a fatty. Although his foundation was excellent and no matter how much he ate his size wouldn't go overboard, his appearance had still changed. After that, the Fourth Ghost King had ordered for all the mirrors of the away palace to be thrown out, and he hated hearing the words "fat" or "obese". Rumour had it that there had once been a pretty attending mistress who had been singing him songs, but the first three lines of the lyrics had been "half-crescent moon, half-crescent moon, half-crescent^[10]..."

Before the last 'moon' had even left her lips, the Fourth Ghost King had booted her out with a kick to the chest, yelling, "Fat fat fat! I allowed two fats, but it's not enough, you were still going for a third! Don't think by breaking the word down, this king won't understand you're beating around the bush and disparaging me, the audacity!"

Which was why even though these ghost men were staunch and hardy, they didn't dare go after Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. Each of them bowed their heads low, letting the Fourth Ghost King complain and vent. In the end one, more clever than the others, spoke up. "My king is so agile, how can we possibly catch up to people my king can't chase down?"

Only then did the Fourth Ghost King huff out a breath and let the chase go altogether. He turned to his subordinates, saying, "Mn, that's true... Good that you all are self-aware. Very well, leave it be. Go pass on this king's command: All the doors of the away palace are to be shut, the palace walls be covered in sealing spells. Not a single fly shall be let out of this place."

He tsk-ed then finally spat out the grape seed sitting in his mouth, muttering threateningly, "I'd sure like to see where the two of them can run off to."

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were both agile, plus the interior of the palace was full of twists and turns, so it didn't take long before they'd ditched the ghost wards chasing after them. The two hid in a narrow, dark little alley. Chu Wanning

was a ghost, so no matter how long they ran, he wouldn't get tired. Mo Ran however, was of mortal flesh, and he leaned against the wall, panting.

Chu Wanning glanced out, and said somberly, "He's completely sealed the palace."

Mo Ran, still catching his breath, waved his hand. "It's fine, Shizun. Come into the Soul-Calling Lantern, this way we can both return directly to the mortal realm, he won't be able to stop us for sure."

Chu Wanning gave a small nod, but for some reason, there was still worry colouring his brows.

Mo Ran didn't notice. He took out the Soul-Calling Lantern and silently recited the spell. However, the golden light only flickered a few times before it completely extinguished. Chu Wanning's Earth Soul still stood before him, perfectly fine, entirely unmoved.

"What's going on?" Mo Ran was shocked. "Why isn't it working?"

The glumness between Chu Wanning's brows were even more evident now, and he sighed. "Just as I thought. The deliverance spell doesn't work here. We'll probably have to leave the palace before we can use the spell to return to the mortal realm."

"....." Hearing this, Mo Ran bit his lip, a stubborn look in his eyes. It took a moment before he said, voice hoarse, "I'll get you out of here no matter what."

Chu Wanning gave him a look before replying, "We'll need to hurry. The palace is massive, and it won't be easy for the ghost pawns to find you, but there's no food or water here. I'll be fine but you won't last for long."

Mo Ran smiled, "Hunger I can endure, I grew up with it so I'm used to it."

After recovering for a while, waiting till their surroundings had quieted down, the two eventually came out of the alleyway. The watery, cool moonlight fell upon their figures, one with a shadow, one without, as they walked side by side down the long, empty bluestone street.

"Shizun." Mo Ran called out.

"....."

"I offended you, earlier at the gate. Sorry."

Chu Wanning seemed caught off guard for a moment, then he cast his eyes down, long lashes lowering over his gaze. "It's fine."

"Because of the circumstances, my words were... also offensive. I'm sorry about that too."

Chu Wanning, "....."

"It was also incredibly improper of me to say that you're already married, I'm sorry again."

Chu Wanning suddenly stopped in his tracks and replied, voice frosty, "How long are you going to keep saying I'm sorry for? Don't you know how to say anything else?"

"Something else?" Mo Ran's heart started to race. He thought very hard for a moment, then very carefully tried changing his vocabulary, "Then... I apologize?"

"....."

Chu Wanning shook out his sleeves and left.

This pitiful Mo Ran had absolutely no idea what he'd said to make him unhappy. He was worried he'd further irritated his shizun, but also afraid that if he said more, he would get even more annoyed. So he scratched his head where he stood, and followed after obediently.

"Shizun."

"Mn?"

Walking halfway, Mo Ran asked in spite of himself, "Have you ever... been through any karmic events?"

Chu Wanning stopped and turned to face him. "What do you mean?"

"I found another Earth Soul of yours in the Underworld, which means you have one extra piece of soul more than everyone else...Earlier, I met Chu Xun at Tailwind Hall and asked him about it. He said that the extra piece of soul shouldn't have been something that you originally possessed." Mo Ran continued hesitantly, "But, including the body in the mortal realm, I have definitely seen four of Shizun, so I was thinking... if Shizun's formed any bonds of fate in the past..."

Chu Wanning was silent for a while. There was a light in the depths of his eyes, like he'd thought of something, but then he closed his eyes and said, "I don't think I have."

He paused for a moment, then, hesitant and a little confused, asked, "I really have four souls?"

"Mhm."

"....."

Chu Wanning didn't know why that would be either. He thought it over for a while, contemplating, then sighed. "This isn't something I can answer, and it doesn't affect anything, so let's just let it go."

The two continued to carefully follow along remote little paths while inspecting the spiritual strength of the spell the Fourth Ghost King had used to seal off the entire away palace.

"All barriers have a weakness."

Chu Wanning said as they came before a watchtower. His fingers brushed over the rough walls, over which blue light flowed intermittently. He closed his eyes, trying to capture the flow of the energy streaming beneath the stones. However, he didn't have any spiritual power at the moment and trying to sense out the feeling drained him. After a moment, Chu Wanning dropped his hand and shook his head dejectedly.

"My soul isn't whole and my powers are impaired, so I don't know how to break through this for the moment."

"Why doesn't Shizun teach me, and I can try?" Mo Ran suggested.

"It won't do. The art of barriers is complex, it's not something one can learn in a day or two."

"Then what are the typical weak points of spiritual barriers?" Mo Ran asked. "Why don't we try them one by one?"

“...Every barrier has its own weakness, there isn’t a one size fits all method to breaking them. If we’re going to test them one by one, I really don’t know how long that would take.”

“How would we know if we don’t try?” Mo Ran smiled. “Maybe I’ll get really lucky?”

Chu Wanning opened his mouth, about to reply, when at the periphery of his vision he spotted a moving white shadow. His brows immediately furrowed, and he extended his hand, moving out of habit to summon Tianwen, but nothing happened. His expression darkened unconsciously, and he yelled sharply, “Who’s there?!”

That white shadow immediately tried to flee.

As if Mo Ran would let that happen. He darted over and in a ferocious instant, had the ghost captured in his arms. He smothered the ghost’s mouth and nose, preventing it from calling out, then twisted its arms behind its back, pushing it to kneel on the ground. When he focused and saw who it was, he couldn’t help but burst out in anger.

“RONG JIU...!”

The young man kneeling on the ground was tender and fair, like willow vines drifting in the breeze, but his eyes brimmed with a trace of unwillingness. He twisted his head back, not uttering a single word.

Mo Ran said angrily, “Are you off to snitch again? You really think I won’t kill you?!”

Chu Wanning walked over. He had never met Rong Jiu before, and after glancing him over, asked Mo Ran, “You know him?”

Mo Ran didn’t know what to say. He thought to himself about those two crimes of stealing and debauchery he’d committed back then, the ones that Chu Wanning had publicly put him to trial for upon the Platform of Sin and Virtue. At that time, he’d only thought Chu Wanning to be cruel and malicious, and his heart had been steeped in hatred for the man. To have this old history once more thrust in their faces made Mo Ran want to find a hole to crawl into and hide.

Chu Wanning didn’t notice anything off however, and only took this person as an acquaintance of Mo Ran’s. “Since he’s followed you all the way here, then don’t leave him behind in this palace. Once we’ve found a way to get out, let’s bring him along with us.”

As he spoke, he took a careful look over Rong Jiu, “A perfectly decent person. Reincarnation should be top priority.”

Mo Ran, “.....”

Upon hearing these words, Rong Jiu, who had initially been panicking a little, was at first taken aback, but then he suddenly smiled. His eyes softened into a gentle and charming gaze as he glanced over at Mo Ran. “This must be Shizun then?”

“What Shizun, who said you could call him Shizun?!” Mo Ran said angrily. “He’s *my* Shizun!”

Rong Jiu still harboured some resentment against him, so he replied languidly, purposely trying to infuriate him, “Oh, I see, my Shizun then.”

“YOU——!”

With this back and forth, Chu Wanning finally detected something amiss. He asked, "Mo Ran, are there some hard feelings between the two of you?"

"I..."

Rong Jiu replied, smiling, "Good Shizun, don't be angry with him. There are no hard feelings between us, just some old relations."

The way he'd said it was ambiguous, but his tone was extremely affectionate. Chu Wanning didn't say anything, but his eyes narrowed and his lips slowly thinned. At first glance, his expression was as indifferent as ever, but the gloominess between his brows could not be fully concealed. Rong Jiu had grown up in a whorehouse and was an expert in reading expressions; how could Chu Wanning, with his pure personality and naivete, hide the emotion flickering in his eyes from Rong Jiu?

Rong Jiu was a bit shocked. He'd originally thought Mo Ran a sleazy philanderer, audaciously in love with his own shizun. Yet, unexpectedly, now that he'd met the shizun in question, it didn't seem one-sided.

...How filthy, this Sisheng Peak.

Even though he was in a dire situation right now, Rong Jiu still couldn't help but sigh, feeling both disgusted and amazed—in the Cultivation Realm, dual cultivation between men wasn't anything unheard of, but it was nonetheless considered unseemly. As the gongzi of Sisheng Peak, if Mo Ran actually got together with his benefacting mentor and word of this got out, sect leader Xue Zhengyong would have nowhere to hide his face.

Rong Jiu blinked his charming and affectionate peach blossom eyes, sizing Chu Wanning up. He was just about to say a few more words, ready to add oil to the flames, but the other man spoke up first.

"You're dead as you can be, what old relations are there to speak of."

"Well wasn't xianjun the one who asked me?" Rong Jiu chuckled. "I was just answering honestly."

"Who asked you," Chu Wanning said coldly. "I've been directing my questions to him from the start."

Of course there wasn't any need to clarify who "him" was. His tone was also laced with sparks; his intent for Rong Jiu to draw clear their relationship could not have been any more obvious. Hearing Chu Wanning siding with him, Mo Ran's heart swelled, warmth blooming in his chest. He wanted to say something, but before he could get closer to the other man, Chu Wanning had already turned around in anger.

"Deal with this yourself."

But Mo Ran himself didn't actually know what to do. If he were to let Rong Jiu go, there was a chance Rong Jiu would turn around and trip them up, rat on them. But keeping Rong Jiu with them would be like carrying around a barrel of gunpowder; if Rong Jiu were to say something he shouldn't, Chu Wanning just might choke to death. As Mo Ran agonized over this, Chu Wanning went to inspect the Fourth Ghost King's barrier once more. Taking advantage of this, Mo Ran yanked Rong Jiu by the collar and gritted out, keeping his voice hushed, "Just what do you want?"

"I'm just irked and upset." Rong Jiu's thick lashes carefully flickered, a small light shimmering within his gaze. "I just can't stand that a villain like you gets a do-over."

But Mo Ran knew just what kind of person Rong Jiu was. He wasn't the kind of person who would do something that would harm both others and himself, he'd only ever do things that'd harm others and benefit himself. No matter how resentful he was, what mattered most to him was spending his days in comfort. There was no reason for him to risk death in order to follow them.

His eyes swept over the other man, and landed on Rong Jiu's feet.

There was only one shoe on those delicate and fair feet. The other foot was bare and smeared with mud, obviously the result of having fled in a hurry.

Mo Ran narrowed his eyes. "Tell the truth."

Rong Jiu: "Didn't I already tell you? The truth is I can't stand——"

"If you plan on lying to blackmail me again, I will immediately blind your eyes, block your mouth and throw you down a well. You're already a ghost, so you won't die from hunger, nor will you be able to escape. If you're lucky, the patrol will find you in a couple days. If you're unlucky, then prepare yourself to be stuck in that well for eight to ten years." Mo Ran paused, then continued, voice very dark, "Decide for yourself."

As expected, Rong Jiu's face changed colours.

A moment later, he said, "I changed my mind. I don't want to stay here, you have to take me out."

"What, don't wanna be a ghost husband anymore?"

"....." Rong Jiu bit his lip down tight, then angrily raised his head. "I want to live a normal life too, I want another start." He breathed in deeply, then declared, "I want reincarnation."

"Fine. Then let me ask you another thing. Was it you who snitched to the patrol and told them where I was?"

"....."

"Even if you keep quiet, I have ways to make you confess up." A red light flickered in Mo Ran's hand, and he said, voice low and dark, "Speak."

"Yes, I was the one who told, but so what." Rong Jiu held his head high, his eyes shining with resentment. "If I didn't tell them where to look, how would I have escaped?"

Mo Ran flung his collar away from him, laughing through his rage. "Well, you certainly know how to hit someone when they're down, I'll give you that."

"I'm good at slandering too." Rong Jiu slowly put himself back together, patting his robes back into place. He threw a look at Chu Wanning, standing not too far away. "Mo-xianjun, you really care about that person, don't you? What do you think he'll do if I tell him, in full detail and without exaggeration, how you used to fawn over me so indulgently?"

Author's Notes:

Light a sympathetic candle for the Fourth Ghost King, who had everything ruined for him once he got fat lollll

Ch.117 Shizun Tells Me To Get The Hell Out

What Rong Jiu meant to say, of course, was that Chu Wanning would definitely get upset and jealous, that he wouldn't be able to handle it.

But Mo Ran didn't know that Chu Wanning had actually loved him all along; he mulled over Rong Jiu's words, and only thought that he was threatening to tell Chu Wanning about his past misdeeds. For a master to have to listen to all of his disciple's many outrageous acts recounted one by one, how mortifying would that be? Wouldn't he die of anger?

So he snapped immediately, "You leave him alone!"

Rong Jiu smiled coquettishly, beautifully effeminate despite being a man. He said softly, "I'll behave if you protect me and take me with you, promise I won't say anything or make any trouble."

With no other choice, Mo Ran cursed under his breath and turned to leave. Rong Jiu followed after gleefully, knowing it for the silent acquiescence that it was. But Mo Ran barely went two steps before he whipped his head around and pointed a finger at him, whispering low and threatening, "Rong Jiu, if you so much as put a single toe out of line, I'll make sure to scatter your soul before you can even *touch* the gate of reincarnation."

Rong Jiu was a picture of affected coyness as he said sweetly, "If you don't mess with me, I won't mess with you. I'll behave as long as you don't mistreat me. Mo-xianjun, shouldn't you of all people know what kind of person I am? You're my old regular, after all."

"....." Mo Ran was as disgusted by that soft, saccharine tone of his now as he had been fond of it in the past life, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it as he watched Rong Jiu drift over to Chu Wanning's side. He really couldn't understand it——

Had he been blind back then or what?

Song Qitong, Rong Jiu... how the hell had he managed to fall for people like them?

If he could be reborn into his past life in front of his past self, he'd really like to grab Taxian-jun by the neck and open his head up, check just how much water had gotten in there. Seriously, what the hell was all this?

Luckily Rong Jiu hadn't said anything outright earlier, and Chu Wanning was basically a blank sheet in matters of the heart, so after some words of explanation smilingly delivered by seasoned veteran Rong Jiu, Chu Wanning's tightly furrowed brows gradually relaxed.

He even thought that he was the one with the impure thoughts, to have misunderstood what this person meant by "old relations" earlier. He secretly felt rather embarrassed about it, though his expression remained unchanged.

Rong Jiu had to work if he was gonna tag along. Being the one most familiar with the palace, he said, "Not many people frequent this street, but it's not exactly hidden. Let's go to another place for peace of mind while you two figure out how to break through the barrier."

This other place he mentioned was a storehouse for clothing and fabrics in the Underworld, with bolts upon bolts of white burlap cloth piled high, perfect for hiding out.

The three of them picked a remote location, and Chu Wanning felt along the wall with his fingertips as if taking a patient's pulse, trying his best to feel out the spiritual barrier currently covering the entire away palace.

But a long while passed and he was still getting nowhere, while his soul grew weaker for his efforts. Mo Ran put his hand over Chu Wanning's, tugging it off the wall, and said, "Get some rest."

Angry and helpless, Chu Wanning could only seethe as he stared at his own hand. "Why is this soul of mine missing spiritual powers of all things?"

"What if I give you some of mine?"

"I wouldn't be able to use it." Chu Wanning glanced at Rong Jiu off in the distance, and lowered his voice. "You're a living person, I'm a ghost, yin and yang energies are dissonant."

Chu Wanning was back on it after a short break. If he had his three souls and his spiritual powers, then all it would've taken was to send a burst of spiritual energy into the barrier, and he would've easily been able to pinpoint the weakness in the Fourth Ghost King's spell. But right now he hardly had any spiritual energy at all, and it was truly too difficult to try and seek out the weakness by forcing what tiny bit of it he had into the barrier, like looking for a single leaf in the vast ocean.

Two hours passed, and Rong Jiu started getting restless. He ran over and pulled at Mo Ran. "Can we get out or not?"

Mo Ran said, "Knock it off and go sit down."

"Come on, I'm worried sick already, just tell me if we can get out or not."

"Worrying won't do you any good, just wait."

Rong Jiu complained, "Isn't your Shizun supposed to be really powerful? It's been so long already, why isn't anything happening?"

"He only has one of three souls, and this one's missing spiritual powers. Can you just be quiet?"

Rong Jiu seemed dejected at his words, eyelashes flickering as he sat back down on the pile of white burlap cloth.

Another two hours and then some passed. Rong Jiu got up and walked over to Chu Wanning. "Xianjun, is there any other way?"

Fingertips still pressed against the wall, Chu Wanning replied without opening his eyes, "No."

"Th-then is there some way to get at least some amount of your powers back?"

Chu Wanning thought about it for a moment before asking, "Do you have any spiritual energy?"

"No..." Rong Jiu was taken aback. "Why does xianjun ask..."

"If you did, you could've passed me some to use."

Rong Jiu said excitedly, "That easy? Then hurry and have Mo-xianjun..."

Chu Wanning cut him off. "His is useless."

Of course Rong Jiu didn't know that Mo Ran wasn't actually a ghost. His smile froze as soon as he heard that Mo Ran's couldn't be used. "How come?"

"Different elements, is all." Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning was no good at lying, and it'd be best not to let Rong Jiu know the truth about him not being a ghost, so he cut him off immediately. "Can you *please* just go keep watch outside and let us know if you see anyone coming this way."

Rong Jiu shot him an irate glare, but the three of them were stuck in the same boat right now, so he could only begrudgingly go over to the storehouse entrance and reluctantly lean against the door, picking at his nails while glancing about outside with that pair of hazy peach blossom eyes.

Mo Ran glanced over at him before sitting down next to Chu Wanning.

He hesitated for a while, but in the end decided he didn't want to keep anything from Chu Wanning, so he spoke up, "Shizun, I...I want to apologize for some wrongs I've committed."

"What wrongs?"

"Um, do you remember that time when you had me reprimanded at the Platform of Sin and Virtue, for..." Mo Ran paused, too embarrassed to say debauchery. A person's face really was quite the mysterious thing—thick like the great wall when they didn't care, thin like a sheet of paper and just as flimsy as soon as they began to care.

Mo Ran lowered his head bashfully and said in a small voice, "...for breaking the fourth, ninth, and fifteenth commandments."

The fourth commandment, thievery.

The ninth commandment, debauchery.

The fifteenth commandment, deceit.

Of course Chu Wanning wouldn't forget that time. His eyes opened, but he didn't look at Mo Ran as he muttered, "Mn."

Looking at that cool, disciplined expression, Mo Ran felt even more ashamed, dropping his gaze after a moment and quietly whispering, "Shizun, I'm sorry."

Chu Wanning could already guess what he was going to say. Although aggrieved, he had always been able to keep a level head during difficult situations, and besides, it wasn't like he was just now finding out about the sleazy things Mo Ran had done back then, so he replied coolly, "Weren't you already punished for that? And there were no repeat offenses after that either, so why bring it up now?"

"Because that Rong Jiu outside... he's..."

Mo Ran couldn't finish the sentence, and Chu Wanning was also silent for a long while.

Then Mo Ran heard Chu Wanning scoff, "So it's him?"

"Mm."

He didn't dare look up at Chu Wanning at all. Sisheng Peak never forbade its disciples from matters of desire, and young people dual cultivating or having a lover on the outside was perfectly normal and ordinary. But Chu Wanning was different. Chu Wanning's cultivation path focused on purity of heart and mind, and he had always treated such carnal things with contempt.

Not to mention Mo Ran had slept around in the brothels back then instead of properly seeing someone like a normal person would...

Xue Zhengyong might not have cared much, with the way he spoiled his nephew. Mo Ran was already of age anyway, and it wasn't like he cultivated the purity path. Moreover it wouldn't be healthy to suppress those needs, so he would just close one eye and let it go. But Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to tolerate it.

He'd be disgusted. Mo Ran had already seen such a reaction, back when he was being punished at the Platform of Sin and Virtue; in Chu Wanning's eyes back then, he had clearly seen disgust, contempt, and loathing.

It's already been so many years, and he hadn't done those things again since, but now that Chu Wanning had run into Rong Jiu in the Underworld, how could he possibly not be bothered? Mo Ran truly felt the weight of the words "what goes around comes around, it's just a matter of time" now.

He wasn't afraid of being scolded or hit by Chu Wanning—in fact, he'd rather he just take out Tianwen and give him another round of lashing—just as long as nothing went awry, as long as the Earth Soul that he had gone through so much to find didn't run off in a huff over this past affair. If Chu Wanning were to leave in a fit of rage, Mo Ran might really kill himself.

The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he felt. Rather than keeping Rong Jiu around like a barrel of gunpowder on legs, it'd be better to just come clean himself and go apologize to Chu Wanning first.

He had it all planned out, deliberately standing in the direction of the door as he confessed, so that if Chu Wanning tried to leave after hearing what he had to say, he could grab him, tie him up if he had to, whatever offense he had to resort to, to keep him from disappearing and leaving him behind. Chu Wanning could be as mad as he wanted *after* this was all over.

Mo Ran was practicing how to block off Chu Wanning's escape routes in his head when the fabric of Chu Wanning's robes shifted slightly in the dim lighting, light catching on scarlet silk and golden embroidery.

Even Mo Ran's heart was trembling as he said in a small voice, "Shizun..."

Chu Wanning said, "This is all ancient history, and punishment's already been dealt out, so what're you telling me these bygones for?" He gave him a sidelong glance, expression coolly indifferent as his thin lips parted deliberately, even a touch sardonically. "What do I care?"

Something like "what do I care" was the last thing he had expected him to say...

Mo Ran was dumbstruck.

He didn't taste any of that vinegar^[11] dripping from Chu Wanning's words; all he felt was panic, thinking that Shizun had lost all hope in him and didn't want to bother with him anymore, didn't care about him anymore. He said, frantically, "Shizun, everything in the past was all my fault, please don't be mad..."

"Why would I be mad, what is there to be mad about." Despite his words, the more he thought about it the more irritated he felt, until Chu Wanning snapped heatedly, "I just *knew* things weren't so clean between the two of you. 'Old relations' indeed, are you still trying to fool me? ...Get out."

"....."

"*Out!*" He was well aware of the sourness in his voice, and he well knew that this was all in the past already, but Chu Wanning just couldn't help muttering under his breath, "Absolutely shameless."

Instead of getting out, Mo Ran only continued to sit there dumbly next to him, staring insistently at him with that pair of bright black eyes.

A moment later, he said, "I'm not leaving."

Chu Wanning said, incensed, "Leave! I don't want to see you right now!"

"I'm not leaving," Mo Ran mumbled, sitting there refusing to budge, like a stupid piece of rock. He was such a despicable person, but as he stared at Chu Wanning and the rims of his eyes grew red, there was somehow also a bit of pitifulness and stubbornness there.

"I'm afraid that if I go, you'll run off... Shizun, don't leave me behind."

"....."

Chu Wanning had no idea that this was what had been on Mo Ran's mind.

Although he felt revolted every time this thing got brought up, it wasn't news to him, and he was also aware of the prevailing normal practice in the cultivation world: be it men or women, once they came of age—provided their cultivation path was not that of purity—practically everyone indulged in some amount of dissolution. It was nothing to raise one's eyebrows at.

Mo Ran was no Xue Meng. Xue Meng had grown up sheltered and coddled, with upstanding parents and a strict education, so he'd always been well-behaved unlike other young masters. But Mo Ran?

A willful personality, always doing whatever he felt like.

Grew up in the pleasure houses.

No father, and a songstress for a mother.

He was a wild, unruly pup that had grown up without guidance, screwing around day in day out all the way until he was fifteen before his uncle plucked him from the mire, fur covered in mud.

Only an idiot would think he was clean and pure like a fine piece of jade. Chu Wanning was no idiot.

It was one thing knowing all that, but seeing Rong Jiu with his own eyes, this beautiful person who had slept around with Mo Ran back then, Chu Wanning was still grossed out.

Unable to make Mo Ran go away, he turned back to the wall, closed his eyes, and went back to checking the barrier.

But as he worked, he just couldn't help thinking about Rong Jiu's pretty little oval-shaped face, that fair, tender-looking skin that was probably soft and smooth to the touch. And those cute little lips, light pink and smooth-talking... that damned Mo Ran had definitely kissed them before. And that little waist, that figure... and, in spite of himself, he even thought about how Mo Ran must have been all tangled up in bed with that effeminate little thing, how repulsive!

When it came to certain things, hearing about it was an altogether different matter than having to see it for oneself. He couldn't help thinking about it now that he had seen, and the more he thought about it the less he could stand for it. Chu Wanning's eyes suddenly snapped open, flames of anger blazing within. He stood up and shoved Mo Ran away none-too-gently. "Get the hell out."

"Shizun..."

"Out."

Left without a choice, Mo Ran could only lower his head and slowly walk outside the storehouse.

Rong Jiu was a little surprised to see him there.

"Oho, Mo-xianjun, did you have a fight with your Shizun?"

Mo Ran didn't even want to acknowledge him; just the sight of him gave him a headache. He had liked him in the past life because he looked a bit like Shi

Mei, and when he had slept with him after his rebirth in this life, it was with a grudge and the intention of screwing him over.

But no matter what, the things he had done in the past were like marks carved into a wooden post, impossible to restore to the way they used to be.

Mo Ran said, "I'll keep watch by myself, go find somewhere else to sit."

The door was the least safe place in the storehouse, and Rong Jiu was only too happy to comply.

But he couldn't resist looking back at Mo Ran after walking only two steps away. He was suddenly a little curious how Mo Ran had died. How did his personality change this much in the few years he hadn't seen him? It was as if he'd gone through some kind of harrowing experience, *how very curious*.

Pretty eyelashes fluttering, he glanced Mo Ran up and down from where he stood behind him. Suddenly feeling like something was a little *off*, he looked him over again, more carefully this time, and his gaze landed on the faint shadow at Mo Ran's feet...

Rong Jiu froze in shock.

Ch.118 Shizun Sometimes Falls For Tricks Too

Mo Ran had a shadow.

He... wasn't dead?

A medley of details flashed through Rong Jiu's mind. The shock would've sent a chill through him followed by a rush of hot blood to his head to scramble his thoughts into utter disarray, if he wasn't already dead.

Rong Jiu stood there frozen in place for a while. How a person reacted to major happenings often had to do with their usual circumstances—for instance, some people were habitually jumpy from past experiences, and would get scared stiff at the first sign of something unexpected, and then there were people like the darling of the heavens Xue Meng, self-possessed and unruffled, unfazed by just about everything.

As for someone like Rong Jiu, who had lived in the mud all his life and suffered all kinds of hardships, his first thought in the face of an unexpected turn of events was—does it pose a threat to him, and if not, then how to benefit from it.

He quickly realized that Mo Ran was a living person who had snuck into the Underworld, and that he himself stood to gain much from this knowledge.

All he had to do was expose Mo Ran, and he would've done the Underworld a great service. That would surely land him in some kind of official position, and then he'd be able to strut about with his chest puffed out. So what if he had sold his body in life? If he could just seize this opportunity, he could go up in the world in death, as men ought to.

It was practically handed to him on a silver platter.

Why bother with reincarnation then? This would offer him a comfortable life right away, a complete turn-around, allowing him to erase all past disgrace and start over anew.

Peach blossom eyes narrowed subtly, something flickering within. Rong Jiu could already see himself being bestowed positions of import and titles of nobility, could see himself sitting behind draping silks on a bamboo sedan chair like those officials of the Underworld, a picture of composure as he was carried through a gathering of ghosts..

Rong Jiu felt more relieved the more he thought about it, but there was a problem—he was weak and delicate, there was no way he was going to be able to sneak off from right under Mo Ran's nose to go tell on him. He had to figure out some way to keep Mo Ran occupied...

As the gears in his head turned, his gaze landed on the red-robed Chu Wanning.

"Chu-xianjun."

Rong Jiu greeted as he took a seat next to Chu Wanning with his cheek propped in hand.

But Chu Wanning only continued probing at the barrier without so much as a sound of acknowledgement, so cold there was practically a layer of frost on his closed eyelashes.

"Still nothing?" Rong Jiu tried.

A few moments passed. Chu Wanning still did not reply, but also did not chase him away, so Rong Jiu sat there and chattered absently about this and that, as if to himself, and then muttered in a soft voice, "Chu-xianjun, to tell you the truth, I wasn't completely honest with you earlier. There's something... I was afraid that you'd look down on me if you knew, that you wouldn't pity me and take me with you anymore."

Chu Wanning's pitch black brows were tightly furrowed, and though he had yet to speak, there was a flame of anger there, burning between his brows—it was just that he was still holding it down, restraining himself from letting it out.

But how could Rong Jiu possibly miss its flickering light?

Rong Jiu said in his soft, delicate voice, "I was thinking about it just now, while I was outside, and I feel really terrible about lying to xianjun, so I wanted to come say sorry..."

As luck would have it, his opener just so happened to match Mo Ran's, both of them wanting to say "sorry".

Chu Wanning wasn't even that repulsed at first, but when those words left Rong Jiu's lips, he finally, slowly opened his eyes, and, without looking at Rong Jiu, asked in a frosty tone, "Which brothel did you work at when you were alive."

Rong Jiu was caught off guard, "Xianjun... already knew?"

He unconsciously stole a glance toward Mo Ran and swore to himself; that guy actually came clean on his own instead of trying to keep it from Chu Wanning... would it be enough for him to fan the flames like this?

"Mo-xianjun and I..."

Chu Wanning cut him off before he could even finish. "I said, which brothel did you work at when you were alive."

Rong Jiu bit his lip. "The Immortal Peach Pavilion in Black Bamboo Town."

"Hm, Immortal Peach Pavilion," Chu Wanning repeated it back with a wry tug of his lips before falling silent again, a terrifying expression on his face.

Rong Jiu snuck several glances at him, pursed his lips, and tried tentatively, "Chu-xianjun, you wouldn't look down on me, would you?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

"I lived a hard life and had a feeble body, and got sold to the brothel at a young age. If only I had a choice, of course I would've wanted to be a demon-slaying hero like xianjun too," Rong Jiu said with a sigh, muttering wistfully. "It'd be wonderful if, in my next life, I could become someone outstanding like xianjun too."

"Reincarnation won't change the nature of a soul," Chu Wanning said impassively. "Condolences, but you and I belong to different walks of life."

Having been shut down like this, Rong Jiu's smile didn't even falter as he said, "I know I could never compare with xianjun, it was only a wishful thought. For people like us, if we don't give ourselves something to hope for, a dream to cling to, we wouldn't last a year in the brothels before thinking about how to end it all."

When Chu Wanning didn't respond, Rong Jiu glanced toward Mo Ran out of the corner of his eye, checking to make sure that he couldn't hear their little chat before continuing with a soft sigh, "After all, the guests at the brothel were usually cruel and callous, and hardly even saw us as human. In that place, being visited by a kindly guest like Mo-xianjun was something to be envied."

Chu Wanning remained silent, but the veins stood out on the back of his hand that was pressed against the wall. If he had his powers right now, there would probably be five holes in that wall already.

A moment passed during which he tried and failed to hold it back. Finally, he uttered in a dark, low voice, "What is there to be envious of."

A thread of affection appeared on Rong Jiu's gentle, lovely face—not too much and not too little, just the right amount.

"Because Mo-xianjun is a good person, of course. Although he acted up and stole from me in the end, it was probably because I didn't serve him well enough in the past. He always used to be such a reasonable, charming person before."

Chu Wanning's face was cold and impassive as he listened without a word.

"Everyone who's ever served him at my place talked about how good and kind he was, and lots of us were always hoping for him to come back."

"...Did he go often?"

Rong Jiu feigned a dry laugh, "How often is often? I'm not quite sure how to answer xianjun's question."

"Then tell me how regularly he went, whom he asked for, and when his last visit was." Those thin lips were like a pair of knives, and each question glinted with a cold, dangerous light like they were out for Mo Ran's life.

Rong Jiu pretended not to notice the frosty light in Chu Wanning's eyes, embellishing and exacerbating as he answered, "I didn't really keep track of how regularly he went, but I always saw him around for at least ten of the thirty days each month, if not more. As for whom he asked for... it varied. *Sigh*, Chu-xianjun, it's all in the past already, so don't blame him anymore..."

"I asked when his last visit was." Chu Wanning's face was practically a thick layer of ice. "Answer the question."

In actuality, Mo Ran had never gone back to see Rong Jiu again after that day he'd been reborn, nor had he gone to any other brothel after that.

But, looking at Chu Wanning's expression, Rong Jiu knew he couldn't speak the truth, so he feigned uncertainty and fanned the flames some more. "I'm... not

sure about that, but I do remember seeing Mo-xianjun in the brothel now and again, up to when I died... so probably around then?"

He had barely finished speaking when Chu Wanning stood up abruptly, hand pulling back from the wall, wide sleeve falling over slender fingers.

In the hazy darkness, sparks blazed in his eyes as his entire body trembled minutely.

Rong Jiu was secretly delighted, thinking this guileless xianjun really was easy to fool. He was a prostitute, a veteran in the arena of love affairs, an expert at reading other people's feelings. Baiting someone all virtuous and upright like Chu Wanning was a piece of cake for him, hook, line, and sinker.

Rong Jiu pulled out the nervous expression he already had prepared as he said in a hurry, "Chu-xianjun, what is it, did I say something wrong? I-it's all misdeeds of a previous lifetime now, so please don't blame Mo-xianjun anymore... he... he's not a bad person..."

"Like I need you to tell me if he's a bad person or not!" Chu Wanning snapped, so angry he was shaking. "And what business of yours is it if I want to teach my own disciple a lesson?!"

"Chu-xianjun..."

Chu Wanning completely ignored him. There was a chill coming off his gaze, even as sparks flew off the rage blazing in his eyes. He shoved Rong Jiu aside from where he was trying to block his way and strode over to the door of the storehouse, grabbed Mo Ran by the back of his collar, and yanked him to his feet.

Mo Ran looked back, startled. "Shizun?"

Chu Wanning pulled his hand back, as if even the collar of his robes was too filthy to touch. He stared Mo Ran down like a cheetah on the hunt, growling lowly and just about to pounce, but he was much too angry to speak, even after a long moment had passed.

What even was there to say anymore?

If Mo Ran hadn't realized his wrongs even after being reprimanded on the Platform of Sin and Virtue, if he had already apologized and had been acting like a decent human being in front of himself all this time...

But was actually still sneaking around to this Peach-Parting Pavilion and that Cutsleeve Lodge to fool around with prostitutes?!

Mo Ran had no idea he had been slandered; all he saw was the darkness on Chu Wanning's face, his expression a mixture of anger and revulsion, and—he wasn't sure if he was seeing things—a layer of stifled sadness.

"Mo Weiyu, just how much of your words in the past were true, and how many were lies?"

Chu Wanning's voice was hoarse and his eyelashes quivered. A while passed, then he said in a low voice.

"...You...really are deficient by nature, beyond remedy...!"

Those words were like a boulder crashing into the ocean, sweeping up a massive wave in its wake.

Mo Ran jolted violently. He took two steps back, shaking his head as he stared at him at a loss.

It couldn't be...

It couldn't be...

Those were the words that Chu Wanning had only spoken to him in the past life when he'd lost all hope in him.

Why would he say it now? Wasn't everything going fine?

Mo Ran flew into a panic, not knowing what had happened. He was about to speak when Chu Wanning cut him off, the rims of his eyes reddening as anger blazed in his gaze like a wildfire.

He said, voice raw, "Just how much longer are you going to lie to me?!"

Mo Ran's mind was utter chaos.

What lie? What had Chu Wanning found out?

He had too many dirty, unspeakable secrets. Thus, faced with Chu Wanning's terrifying glare, he didn't even think to suspect that it was because Rong Jiu had done something. Chu Wanning stepped closer, Mo Weiyu backed off. Kept backing off until his back hit the wall.

Chu Wanning came to a stop. A few moments passed in silence as he stared at Mo Ran's face. Mo Ran heard a tightness in his Shizun's voice, like he was choking back a sob.

"What do you even want me to go back for? For you to keep lying to me, angering me, leading me around by the nose? ...I thought you had turned over a new leaf, Mo Ran—I thought you were worth teaching, that you had changed for the better! I thought I could teach you to be good..."

He closed his eyes slowly, and a moment later, spoke in a quiet voice.

"Incorrigible."

"Shizun——"

"Get lost."

"....."

"Which part of get lost do you not understand?!" Chu Wanning's eyes flew open, his gaze frosty. "Mo Weiyu, you disappoint me. How do you expect me to pretend like I don't know anything, to go back to the world of the living with you?"

Mo Ran's entire heart clenched. Heedless of his anger, he grabbed Chu Wanning's wrist within his billowing sleeve and shook his head, begging with teary, reddening eyes, "Shizun, please don't be angry, tell me what happened, okay? Whatever I did wrong again, I'll change, okay? Just please don't chase me off..."

Change... that's what he had said back then, too, and did he? If not for meeting Rong Jiu here, would Chu Wanning have ever found out about these unseemly things?!

It is said that concern makes a person rash; Chu Wanning was usually calm and collected, but he had a fiery disposition and acted on emotion in matters of the heart. And on top of that, the past relationship between Rong Jiu and Mo Ran had indeed been improper, and Rong Jiu had put on such a convincing performance, so Chu Wanning fell for it completely.

Unable to pull free from Mo Ran's grip, Chu Wanning lifted his other hand to summon Tianwen in a fit of anger, but of course nothing appeared.

He was mad enough to keel over; probably would've spit blood by now if he wasn't already dead.

And then there was suddenly a brilliant scarlet radiance as Mo Ran summoned Jiangui. He put Jiangui into Chu Wanning's hand and then knelt down before his shizun, keeping his other hand wrapped firmly around Chu Wanning's wrist the whole time, deathly scared that he might leave. Mo Ran said, "Shizun, I know I... I've done lots of things that made you angry and upset in the past... but since coming down to the Underworld, everything I've said to you has been true."

He lifted his head, eyes brimming with tears as he looked up at him. "All of it was true, I didn't lie to you..."

Clenching Jiangui in his hand, Chu Wanning's heart burned with rage, but also felt pained at the same time. Mo Ran's hand was wrapped so tightly around his own, trembling uncontrollably, despairingly, but refusing to let go, his agony so palpable that it nearly seemed to pierce into the depth of Chu Wanning's very soul; how could he possibly not feel it?

Mo Ran continued, "If Shizun is upset, if Shizun doesn't want to forgive me, then please just hit me, yell at me, anything is fine. And if you really don't want to see me again... if you think I... if you think I'm... deficient by nature, beyond remedy..."

His voice broke on that phrase.

Mo Ran lowered his head where he knelt before Chu Wanning.

"If Shizun really... doesn't want me anymore..."

He didn't want Chu Wanning to see him cry, but he couldn't stop the shaking in his shoulders as silent tears soaked a dark patch into the ground.

"Then I'll... I'll leave Sisheng Peak... and never... never show myself in front of Shizun again... but please... please I'm begging you..."

His forehead was nearly touching the muddy ground where he was kneeling, but his hand around Chu Wanning's wrist was still hanging on so tightly, so stubbornly, as if he'd sooner die than let go.

"Please, don't leave."

"....."

"Shizun..."

Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

"You promised me you'd go back with me, so please don't leave..."

There was an aching in his chest; he was only a fragment of a soul, so how could it still feel like his heart was being stabbed by knives, burnt by flames?

Chu Wanning's eyes snapped open in anger and resentment. "I promised you? Then what about what you promised me? Back at the Platform of Sin and Virtue you said you'd realized your wrongs, and then kneeling at Clearsky Hall you said you'd never do it again—so why didn't you keep your word! Mo Weiyu, did you really think I'd never find out, that I wouldn't discipline you again?!"

".....!!" Mo Ran startled, lost and confused like he was stuck in a foggy haze. He raised his head and looked up through teary eyes. "What?"

The word barely had time to leave his lips when Jiangui flashed bright scarlet and lashed out viciously toward the side of his face. Instantly, there was an eruption of crackling sparks, and blood splattered onto the ground and wall in an arc.

Chu Wanning really was furious.
He hadn't held back at all in that strike.

A bloody gash appeared on the side of Mo Ran's face, bleeding profusely.
But he paid it no mind as he clutched at Chu Wanning's hand, asking with wide eyes, "What do you mean Platform of Sin and Virtue? What Clearsky Hall? ...I... what am I keeping from you? What am I lying to you about?"

His string of questions only made Chu Wanning even more incensed. He tried to shake him off again, but couldn't.

Mo Ran suddenly realized that something was off. He whipped his head around to look back toward the inside of the storehouse——

While the two of them were fighting and far too distracted to notice anything else, that Rong Jiu had snuck away and ran off!!!

Mo Ran's expression changed as he immediately realized what was happening. "...Shizun, we fell for his trap! Come on, we have to leave! It's not safe here anymore, hurry!"

He ran for the door, pulling Chu Wanning along, but they barely made it two steps out when Rong Jiu appeared in the distance with a group of ghost soldiers, still tattling, "They're right this way, that living person and the soul that's with him... the two of them..."

Mo Ran roared furiously, "I should've killed you!"

There was no time to explain; Mo Ran led the way, holding tightly onto Chu Wanning's hand as they ran through streets and alleys. There were more and more pursuers behind them, and the sounds of sentry whistles and clappers rang throughout the palace grounds. Chu Wanning glanced back to see four, maybe five separate groups of lanterns stream out from the main alleys to gather into one, like a hissing snake formed of fire coming after them.

Rong Jiu's face was practically glowing with glee as he chased after Mo Ran and Chu Wanning with all that he had in that frail body of his, weak from all the hardships and abuse he had suffered in the past, running like a famished jackal chasing after its prey. Thinking that finding them out first and turning them in had earned him a great credit, and drunk on the feeling of accomplishment, he unexpectedly mustered a commanding aura.

"Catch them——catch that intruding live person——!"

His arm was suddenly grabbed as he was running. Rong Jiu whipped around angrily, faltering when he saw that it was the captain of the soldiers who had caught him before, but still snapped indignantly, "What're you grabbing me for? Hurry and go catch that person up ahead!"

"Sure they're escapees, but aren't you one as well?" The captain narrowed his eyes, looking at him maliciously.

Alarmed, Rong Jiu shot back, "I-I only ran because I wanted to help the Fourth Lord catch them, I was the one who found the live person... I was the one who found out that Mo Weiyu isn't a ghost, don't you even think about capturing me just to steal my credit in front of the Fourth Lord!"

The captain was a little taken aback at first, before he put two and two together and burst out laughing instead. "*You* found him out first? Credit? Hahaha me stealing *your* credit?"

The laughter stopped abruptly.

"Are you so desperate for distinction that you've gone mad trying?! The Fourth Lord himself was the one who discovered that live person! Did you think

he'd seal the entire away palace off with a barrier just to catch some random little ghost? Hah, stealing credit indeed. You must be blind, trying to steal the Fourth Lord's credit!"

Rong Jiu stumbled in shock and fell to the ground.

He watched as the army of ghost soldiers stomped past him in pursuit of Mo Ran and Chu Wanning. Rong Jiu trembled, lips quivering as he muttered, "Already discovered? The ghost king already... saw through them himself? I... I'm not the first? N-no credit? I..."

Those visions of riches and fame, of being revered and admired by people lining the streets, came crashing down to the ground and was crushed underfoot by the army stampeding past all around him.

Rong Jiu stared blankly for a while before suddenly flying into a crazed frenzy, trying with every fiber of his being to struggle free. His frail body was like that of a mayfly, lowly yet unwilling to bend to fate, a moth flying into a flame.

His life had never been easy. All he ever knew was a bed, men, wealthy madams, guests that came and went.

A windowless little room filled with scented haze from a brass incense burner, where it was impossible to tell day from night. That was his whole life.

It was a dark, never-ending night. He wanted to see daybreak. For the sake of that daybreak, that chance at living, that tiny bit of hope, he was willing to give up his dignity, his body, his honor, his kindness, his conscience... these were all that he had.

Flying into the flame for that tiny bit of light.

"WAIT! WAIT FOR ME! CHU-XIANJUN, SAVE ME——!!"

"Seize this escapee! Once this is squared away, have him sent to the Fourth Lord himself for interrogation!"

"No——NO!!" Rong Jiu's pale, bloodless fingers clawed at the ground, his hair coming loose into a disheveled mess in the struggle and that charming, lovely face looking eerily terrifying in the cold light of the moon. His eyes bulged outward as he screamed incoherently, "No! Chu-xianjun, save me!" And after a while, began shrieking hysterically, "I was the one who found him first! I found the live person! Me! You can't treat me like this! You never would've found them if not for me! You all just want to steal my reward, my credit!"

He was dragged away, and his crazed shrieks were soon drowned out by the rumble of footsteps...

Author's Notes:

They'll escape the ghost realm tomorrow~

As for Rong Jiu, I won't be writing him an ending. He didn't have anyone to be his guiding light on his path of desperation, and he lacked the opportunities to do good. So he ended up here; those who feel for him, you can come up with interactions between him and the Fourth Ghost King after he's been dragged away233333

Why don't I add a crack mini-theatre today?

Ghost prison Guard A: My king! We caught one trying to run away on his own!!! We've brought him here for you!!!

Fourth Ghost King: Omnomnomnomnom (in the middle of eating, lard and soy sauce rice may be simple but it's really tasty!)

Ghost prison Guard A: My king, stop eating, you'll be a half moon^[12]...

Fourth Ghost King: Burp!! (Angrily smashes bowl) Fat!? This king is sturdy! Mighty! Do you understand!

Rong Jiu: (I don't want my soul to be scattered, I want to be promoted and prosper QAQ) ...The way I see it, my king isn't sturdy or mighty enough. How light is my king? If you want to be sturdy and mighty, it's only right if your arm is as thick as a thigh, and your leg as thick as a waist, why not my king eat a little more?

System notification: Player Rong Jiu [has acquired the correct way of licking orange tabby^[13] Fourth Ghost King's boots].

Ch.119 Shizun's Four Souls Assembled

Chu Wanning hadn't heard what Rong Jiu was shouting back there, but based on the current situation, he didn't need any explanation to realise that Rong Jiu had been purposely trying to provoke him back at the warehouse, to make him angry so Rong Jiu could catch an opportune moment to escape and snitch.

Chu Wanning was the sort of person who would normally think things through in a rational manner no matter the situation, but when it came to situations involving Mo Ran, all his rationality and calm seemed to have disappeared into thin air. He was somewhat flabbergasted to realise just how easily he'd been hoodwinked by a few words from a sissy like that.

He watched Mo Ran who was running a few paces ahead of him, and asked in spite of himself, "Did you ever... go back to Immortal Peach Pavilion, after?"

Having abruptly heard the name he himself had almost forgotten, Mo Ran staggered and yelled, furious, "Rong Jiu, that dirty bastard! Did he say I went back to Immortal Peach Pavilion after?! Why would I! Shizun are you mad at me for this? Because he said I lied to you?"

"....."

"After the whole thing at the Platform of Sin and Virtue, I never went back to... those kinds of places. I wouldn't lie to Shizun; if Shizun doesn't believe me, then you can use Jiangui to bind me and interrogate me."

"...No need."

Chu Wanning dropped his gaze, seeing that Jiangui was still tightly gripped in his hand. Thinking about how he had just injected spiritual powers into the willow vine to whip Mo Ran into a bloody mess without care or reason, that really had been...

Wait, holy weapon?!

Jiangui's flames illuminated his complexion, bright against the darkness of the night. Chu Wanning stared at it for a moment, his mind tossing and turning frantically. He tried reversing the flow of the spiritual powers injected within

Jiangui into the heart of his palm, and instantly felt a powerful and abundant power incessantly rushing in.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning knew where he could draw spiritual power from——

While spiritual powers could not flow between the living and the dead, the powers of a holy weapon didn't care whether the wielder was a human, ghost, god, or demon; as long as the weapon itself accepted, then it'd all be connected!

Mo Ran ran on for a while before he realised that Chu Wanning had stopped. He immediately turned back, and asked anxiously, "Shizun, what is it?"

The lash wound on his face was still bleeding, and with those bright black eyes, he looked all the more pitiful.

Chu Wanning pursed his lips, feeling somewhat chagrined and a little pained. Although he felt like he really had wronged Mo Ran, his inner pride pointed out that Mo Ran really *had* entangled himself with the likes of Rong Jiu in the past, so that lash had not been undeserved.

After a moment of contemplation, Chu Wanning didn't know what tone he should take or what expression to face him with either, so he could only go with the simple route of speaking with no emotions and no expression.

"Mo Ran, stop, and retreat back to the palace walls."

"...To do what?"

Chu Wanning replied flatly, "I'll show you a trick."

"....."

Before he could wrap his head around his Shizun's words, Mo Ran saw the red light of Jiangui flowing endlessly into Chu Wanning's remnant soul, enveloping his spirit with a blanket of flames. Mo Ran's eyes widened as he watched Chu Wanning and Jiangui respond to each other. Suddenly, the flames abruptly vanished. The man garbed in golden and red robes raised the willow vine, hissing with threads of flames, and turned his head to address Mo Ran.

"Mo Ran, give Jiangui an order."

Mo Ran could vaguely guess what he planned to do now, though he could hardly believe it. He promptly shouted a command, "Jiangui, heed Shizun's orders as you would mine."

The willow vine in Chu Wanning's hand crackled through, then erupted into strings of crystal red sparks as the leaves on the vine glowed brilliantly.

Chu Wanning raised his other hand and brushed the tips of his fingers inch by inch over Jiangui, the willow vine coursing with even brighter radiance in the wake of his touch. The thousands of ghost soldiers were closing in now, and behind them the barrier-sealed palace walls stood sky-high. There was nowhere to run to.

But then, Chu Wanning wasn't planning to run.

A flicker of light caught in his eyes and rippled out, and a tempest suddenly roared into life out of nowhere. Chu Wanning's robes danced in the gale as he held the willow vine up high and whipped it ferociously through the air, Jiangui striking out like a soaring dragon, glowing golden, resplendent, illuminating the whole night sky!

With Mo Ran's command, Jiangui no longer rejected Chu Wanning, and instead channeled its abundant spiritual energy ceaselessly into Chu Wanning's Earth Soul.

Chu Wanning's eyes shone with that blinding brilliance, and his voice was deep and steady as he said, "Jiangui, Ten Thousand Coffins!"

"RUMBLE——" In that split second, countless streaks of interlacing gold and red willow vines erupted from the earth, lacerating the magnificent palace hall into chunks of broken shingles and scraps of bricks. One thick and powerful ancient vine fettered those ghost soldiers together and dragged them to the centre of the willow vine, locking them down tight.

Mo Ran watched in shock as all of this happened before his eyes, seeing the holy weapon and the remnant soul work in concert, merging as one.

Seeing Chu Wanning's robes flutter, his jet black hair like smoke and clouds.

In life and in death, his spirit had always been so earth-shatteringly blazing and unstoppable.

Taking advantage of this good opportunity, Chu Wanning resolutely swept to the back, placing his hand on the palace wall. It only took a second with his eyes closed before he immediately discerned the weak point of the barrier.

"Upward nine feet, four inches to the right, use fire to attack!"

Mo Ran immediately followed his instructions and jumped up, and before any of the ghosts within the Away Palace had time to react, the blazing fire spell was already forming in his palms as he slammed it down right in the spot Chu Wanning pointed out.

In an instant, the earth rumbled and the mountains shook. The sky-high palace walls rapidly disintegrated, returning to the height they used to be, and the barrier seal all around also abruptly shattered, crumbling into dust.

"GO!"

There was no need to say that a second time. Mo Ran hopped onto the top of the wall, then turned around to pull Chu Wanning who was following behind up along with him. The two of them broke out from the Fourth Ghost King's Away Palace, their figures swift as they rapidly disappeared into the boundless night.

In a small and narrow alleyway, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran each leaned against a side of a wall, both of them staring at each other, neither saying a word. In the end it was Mo Ran who couldn't hold back and snickered first. "That old ghost will probably be furious to death...hss!" The moment he drew back the corners of his mouth it pulled the injury on his cheeks.

"...Stop laughing," Chu Wanning said.

And so Mo Ran stopped laughing. In the dim alley, his lashes flickered, his pitch-black and gentle eyes gazing at the other. "Shizun, are you still mad at me?"

If he had said "Shizun, haven't you wronged me?" Chu Wanning might not have appreciated it, but instead he had asked whether he was still mad. Chu Wanning wavered for a moment, then silently danced past this subject. "...Hurry and cast the spell. We just escaped from the Fourth Ghost King's Away Palace, he might not have the face to tell it to the other ghost kings for the moment, but the longer this drags on it'll be harder to say."

The moment Mo Ran heard those words he knew Chu Wanning wasn't leaving anymore, that he wasn't going to disappear. And so the heart that had been strung high all this time was finally able to relax.

Mo Ran couldn't help but start to grin again. "Mn." But the more he smiled the more it hurt, and he unconsciously covered his cheek with his hand.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran brought out the Soul-Calling Lantern. He held it up with his hands and bowed his head as he recited the spell in his mind. After three repetitions, a blinding brilliance suddenly flashed from the Soul-Calling Lantern, so bright that neither of them could open their eyes.

He could vaguely hear the voice of Master Huaizui chanting, carried over from across the roaring waters of the land of the dead, carried over unceasingly past the quiet and peaceful river of forgetfulness.

“The time to return... the time to return...”

That voice was very distant, almost difficult to discern, but after a while the chanting of “the time to return” seemed to have come closer, then the voice of Master Huaizui rang in Mo Ran’s ears.

“Why are there two Earth Souls?” There was a trace of concern in Master Huaizui’s obscure voice.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and told Huaizui everything that had transpired.

That faint voice was quiet for a moment, “You’ve met Chu Xun of Tailwind Hall?”

“Mn.”

“.....”

“Master?”

“It’s nothing. Since Chu-gongzi said having two Earth Souls is normal, then it should be thus,” Huaizui said. “Only, this humble monk has never attempted to call back two Earth Souls from the Ghost Realm at the same time before, so this might take a bit longer. I will trouble Mo-shizhu to wait for a moment.”

Mo Ran glanced at the Fourth King’s Away Palace and asked, “How much longer? We just came out from the Fourth Ghost King’s Away Palace, I don’t know when they’ll catch up to us...”

“Not too long. Rest assured, Mo-shizhu.”

The moment Huaizui dropped these words, his voice faded even more, and after a while, it was overtaken completely by the sound of the “the time to return” chanting.

Chu Wanning couldn’t hear Huaizui’s voice, so his brows were slightly furrowed. “What’s going on?”

“Shizun’s souls are unique, Master said we’ll need to wait for a bit,” Mo Ran explained. “It’s too close to the Away Palace here, let’s go further away.”

Chu Wanning nodded and the two walked until they came to a turning corner. By then, the skies were beginning to lighten up, and the old man who had pointed the way before was just preparing to pack up his stall. When he spotted Mo Ran, he “aiyah”-ed, and appeared quite astonished.

“You found him?”

Mo Ran didn’t expect to bump into him again and was taken aback for a moment, then he replied, “Yes, yes I did, thanks so much, uncle.”

“What’s there to thank? It’s little xianjun’s own good luck. Ay... your face is scratched?”

"Oh, it's... it's a whipping from the ghost soldiers," Mo Ran said, making up a reason.

"No wonder. I was gonna say, nothing average can harm a ghost. Sigh... how painful it must be."

The old uncle pondered for a moment then put down the drawer he had packed away and cooked two bowls of small wontons, handing them to the two. "There's only the leftovers that I couldn't sell today, my treat. Eat some before you leave."

Mo Ran thanked the old man, then watched him off as he left, languidly carrying his stall load.

Chu Wanning didn't like to eat scallions and chives and the old man's wonton soup had been peppered with scallion. Mo Ran picked out all the scallions in his bowl before exchanging it with Chu Wanning's. "Shizun, why don't you eat this one."

"....." Chu Wanning sent him a look but didn't decline, and picked up the spoon to taste the food carefully.

Mo Ran watched him eat, the ice cold soup of the Underworld touching his lightly-coloured lips, neither the wontons nor the soup diminishing, the way actual ghosts ate.

"Is it good?"

"It's alright."

"Not as good as the wontons you make."

"*Cough!*" Chu Wanning choked, taken by surprise. He looked up abruptly to stare dumbfoundedly at the grinning man sitting before him, cheeks propped up on his hands. Suddenly, he felt like he was a river mussel whose shell had been forcibly pulled open, left exposed under the sun without a single secret left.

"...What wontons?"

Yuheng Elder knitted his brows, his expression stern, attempting to be ignorant to conceal his teacher's dignity that had now been spilled all over the floor.

"There's no need to hide it anymore." But before that dropped dignity could be picked up, it was shattered into pieces by Mo Ran's hand, extending out to caress his hair.

Chu Wanning was both furious and very dismayed over this.

"I know everything now."

"....."

Mo Ran took the lantern holding the Human Soul out from the qiankun pouch, and placed it beside the stone bench. "Shizun was awkward when alive, and after coming to the underworld, it's still only the Human Soul that's honest."

"I made them for you, but it was only..."

Mo Ran cocked a brow, and continued gazing at him with a faint smile.

But it was only what?

Only because I felt bad? Because I didn't want you to starve? Because I regretted?

Those were all words he could never say out loud.

Chu Wanning thought his own heart had an unspeakable affliction. He'd always had a pride much stronger than normal people, taking "being good to someone", "loving someone", and "being attached to someone" to be shameful things. Having lived through the storms of years past, he had become used to being alone, had become a stern and solitary tree, reaching up to the sky.

A great tree like this didn't have branches that quivered like flowers, stirring affection in people's hearts, nor did it sway with the wind like strings of vines, seductive and enticing.

He only stood there in silence and severity, very steady and dependable, blocking wind and rain for the passersby without a word, allowing those under the tree to hide from the scorching sun.

Perhaps it was because he'd grown too tall, too luxuriant, that people had to intentionally look up before they'd discover—Ah, so this gentle shade had been bestowed by him.

But all those travelers going to and fro, not one of them had looked up, and not one of them had ever noticed him.

After all, people's lines of sight were habitually aimed at places lower than themselves, or at eye level at most. And so Chu Wanning had gradually grown accustomed to this, so accustomed that it had become second nature to him to expect it.

But there was actually no one in the world who was born reliant, or relied upon.

Only, those who always sought the connection of those who were strong would become more and more charming, more and more sweet, limbering their boneless body to curry favour, charm, to use sweet words to win the world.

And the other type of person was someone like Chu Wanning. Ever since he had emerged from the mountain, he'd always been the one depended on. People like him would only become more and more steadfast, more and more strong, until in the end even the face had become iron, the heart steel. People like him were used to seeing others be vulnerable and incompetent; they had seen all there was to see of charm and sweetness, and so they refused to reveal even a morsel of weakness.

They were people who wielded swords, always standing at the ready in full armour.

They couldn't show any weakness, and knew nothing of tenderness.

After so long, it was as if it'd been forgotten that everyone had once been born with emotions and affections, both strong and soft. That every person had, as a child, known how to cry and laugh. Known how to stand up after having fallen, while also desiring for a pair of arms to help them up.

Maybe he had hoped, once upon a time. Hoped that someone would come to help him up. But he'd waited once, and there had been nothing. A second time, and there had still been nothing. After getting disappointed, time and time again, he'd gradually grown accustomed to it. By the time someone finally did come to help him up, he no longer thought it was necessary, and only felt it something shameful.

It was only a trip and fall.

It wasn't like he'd broken his leg, there's no reason to be melodramatic about it.

And what if he *had* broken his leg? People like this would only think: Oh, it's only a broken leg, it wasn't like he'd died, there's no reason to be melodramatic about it.

And what if he'd died?

Even as a ghost he'd think, well, since I'm dead anyway, there's no reason to be melodramatic about it.

People like him put so much effort into breaking away from the pitfalls of this kind of melodrama, but unbeknownst to them, they would fall into another type of pitfall, a kind of prideful illness that was incurable.

Mo Ran stared at this incurable person, waiting to see what he would say.

In the end Chu Wanning didn't say anything, only pressing his lips together, dryly putting the spoon down.
He was very unhappy.

Thus, half a moment later, he stood up abruptly and said, "Try casting the spell again, I want to enter the Soul-Calling Lantern."

"Huh...?" Mo Ran blinked for a second, then laughed. "Is the Soul-Calling Lantern a conch shell, a place where you can go hide when you get embarrassed?"

Chu Wanning's expression was stern and solemn, and he shook out his sleeves as he said, "Embarrassed? Why don't you tell me what reason I have to be embarrassed?"

"Of course Shizun is embarrassed because..."

"I" Chu Wanning hadn't expected Mo Ran would actually be thick skinned enough to say it, and feeling like he'd been pricked by a needle, he exclaimed angrily, "Shut your mouth."

"Because Shizun is good to me."

"....."

Mo Ran now rose to his feet too. The red clouds of the Ghost Realm drifted past the sky, hiding the dreary crescent moon that was peeking its head out, splashing the ground with a layer of fresh frost and illuminating Mo Ran's face.
He wasn't laughing anymore; his expression was solemn and sincere.

"Shizun, I know you're good to me. I don't know if you'll still remember the things I say now after your souls have returned, but... no matter what, I still want to tell you. From now on, you're one of the most important people in the world to me. This disciple has done many absurd deeds in the past, and my heart had been filled with grudge and hate even though I clearly had the best shizun in the world. Now when I think back on it, I'm only filled with infinite regret."

Chu Wanning watched him.

"Shizun is the best, best shizun, and this disciple is the worst, worst disciple," Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning had been feeling a little uneasy at first. But as he listened to Mo Ran using his sad and pathetic vocabulary to try and express himself, doing his utmost but still so clumsy.

Chu Wanning tried to resist, but in the end he couldn't hold back a faint smile.

"Oh." He nodded, and repeated, "Shizun is the best, best shizun, and the disciple is the worst, worst disciple. At least you've finally got some self-awareness."

Chu Wanning wasn't a greedy person; he gave a lot to others but had always asked for very little for himself. Although he wasn't receiving Mo Ran's love, to

become one of the most important people to Mo Ran, to be the best shizun, that wasn't bad either.

He had always been impoverished when it came to feelings anyway, poor, yet refusing to beg for more.

And here was someone, willing to give him a small piece of hot flatbread to munch on.

He felt very happy, munching on the flatbread in small bites, and that was enough for him.

This dummy Mo Ran on the other hand, when he saw dumbfoundedly that he was able to cause this piece of soul to smile as well, his heart swelled with inexplicable joy. "Shizun, you should smile more. You look prettier with a smile than without."

Instead, Chu Wanning ceased to smile.

This prideful disease of his. It made him think "looking pretty" was the praise only wild weeds the likes of Rong Jiu got when they flirted, and he didn't want it.

But Mo Ran with his poor judgment was still trying agonizingly to praise his good shizun, "Shizun, do you know? When you smile... uh... how can I describe it..."

He was working hard trying to think of a phrase that could best describe the beauty of the scene he just witnessed.

Something that was related to smiles.

The watchmen's rattle of the underworld clapped thrice again.

Inspiration struck and he blurted, "That's right! It's a smile in the netherworld^[14]!"

"....."

Chu Wanning was genuinely mad now, and he refused to pay Mo Ran any mind, abruptly pulling his own sleeve aside to pick up the Soul-Calling Lantern. He scolded sternly, "Mo Weiyu, all this blabbering and you still can't cast the spell? If you say one more rubbish word I will go back to that Fourth King's Palace myself, which would be infinitely better than returning to the mortal realm to listen to your nonsense all day!"

Mo Ran was dumbfounded.

Smile in the netherworld... Had he used it wrongly?

Having an especially pretty smile in the underworld, it, it's not wrong...

Disputing on the road was somewhat ostentatious after all. Mo Ran had no idea what he'd said wrong, but if shizun had told him to shut it then he'll just shut his mouth. Thinking this, Mo Ran scratched his head and dragged Chu Wanning to a corner. At this time, that languid chanting in his mind had gradually grown louder and louder. Mo Ran ventured to ask Huaizui, "Master, are you almost ready?"

It was quiet for a moment on the other side, then the knocking sound of a wooden fish came, and Huaizui's voice seemed to be right next to his ears, becoming eminently clear.

"Almost."

Huaizui's voice had only just dropped when dots of golden light started to diffuse out of Chu Wanning's second Earth Soul, and the soul that was standing grew fainter and fainter as the golden light scattered until finally it shattered into millions of streaming fireflies, flowing into the soul lamp like the milky way.

Mo Ran could hear the voice of Master Huaizui chanting, carried over from across the roaring waters of the land of the dead, carried over unceasingly past

the quiet and peaceful river of forgetfulness.

"The time to return... the time to return..."

All sufferings were gradually washed to a faded white in the sighs of that Buddhist chanting, seemingly distant yet close. Mo Ran hugged that Soul-Calling Lantern, feeling his body becoming lighter and lighter, emptier and emptier.

"KO!"

One crisp sound of the wooden fish.

It was like a sharp knife, brutally shattering the trance-like recitation.

Mo Ran snapped open his eyes, looking like he was jolted awake!

Everything from the Ghost Realm had vanished, like he had only just woken from a long dream. He found that he was lying on a bamboo raft, moored by the Naihe Bridge of Sisheng Peak, the waters beneath the bamboo strips lapping ceaselessly, splashing about.

The sky was crab shell blue, but dyed with a touch of pale red. The bamboo leaves along the shores of the great river danced in the air, the thousand whispers of their millions of leaves tender in the air.

It seemed that dawn was about to break.

He blinked dazedly.

Suddenly, he discovered the Soul-Calling Lantern that had been in his arms was gone, and this scared him out of his wits and he jolted upright in a rush.

"SHIZUN——!"

"Don't yell."

A voice, impassive.

Mo Ran panted, looking like someone who had just experienced a nightmare. His face was pale as he turned his head and saw Huaizui kneeling in proper pose on the shore, knocking on the wooden fish placed upon a verdant rock, his eyes open.

"Even if you yell, he won't hear it right now."

The Soul-Calling Lantern rested next to the wooden fish, radiating with streaming light, glowing and magnificent. The force of Chu Wanning's soul was indescribably beautiful.

Huaizui picked up the Soul-Calling Lantern and rose to his feet from the boulder, nodding towards Mo Ran. "Young Mo-shizhu, you've done very well."

Mo Ran quickly crawled up to stand, hopping onto land from the bamboo raft. He tugged on Huaizui and questioned anxiously, "Master, let's go find Shizun's mortal body in Frostsky Hall? Let's go let's go, I'm scared if we're late the souls will disperse again."

Huaizui couldn't hold back a chuckle. "How can the souls disperse so easily?" Then he added, "Don't worry, this humble monk has already sent Xue-shizhu to speak with your esteemed sect leader. Chu Wanning's mortal body should now be on its way to the Red Lotus Pavilion. This humble monk will be going into seclusion there to perform the rite to have the souls of your shizun be transferred once again into the body."

Mo Ran urged, "Then let's go, quickly!" When he saw Huaizui's faint smile, he hastily added, "Master do take your time, no rush, no rush."

But his brows were obviously furrowed, his feet making strides unconsciously, and he almost wanted to reach out to pull on Huaizui's sleeves, looking nothing like there was no rush.

Huaizui shook his head, sighed, then said with a smile, "There's no point in the young shizhu being impatient."

Mo Ran waved his hands, "No rush no rush, steady is best."

"Indeed, steadiness is important. When souls leave the body, they cannot immediately return to the flesh, otherwise it'd be going against the laws of heaven, causing the souls to dissipate. Naturally, this humble monk will go slowly."

"Right right right, good good good, do it slowly." Mo Ran acquiesced incessantly, but still couldn't hold back, and asked very carefully after some hesitation, "Then how long will it take before shizun comes back to life?"

Huaizai was very calm. "Five years."

"I see, five years is g... FIVE YEARS??!!"

Colour drained completely from Mo Ran's face, and he felt like he was choking.

"Five years at the shortest."

Mo Ran, "....."

Author's Notes:

When Shizun officially wakes up, the Mo Ran he'll see is 2.0 Mo Ran~~!
Bring it on! Prepare for system upgrade!

[1] A more accurately nuanced translation of the title would be "the little puppy's past that Shizun doesn't know about" (emphasis on the past rather than the not knowing) but alas it has to start with Shizun

[2] Original text actually said two bowls of congee but that seems to be a typo in view of the next paragraph

[3] In ancient times, dogs made of straw were used as sacrificial offerings then thrown away after, and so also signifies something lowly and worthless

[4] Wangcai and Wangfu are the names of his dogs; wang = prosper, but also the word for a dog's bark in Chinese (i.e., wangwang is the Chinese version of barkbark); cai = wealth, money; fu = fortune, happiness, luck

[5] Different from Shizun's wontons; there are three main varieties of wontons depending on the region--馄饨 [huntun] in the northern regions e.g. Beijing, 云吞 [yuntun] in the southeast regions e.g. Guangdong/Canton (this is the one being sold here); and 抄手 [chaoshou] in the southwest regions e.g. Sichuan (this is the spicy variety that Shizun makes for Mo Ran; Sisheng Peak is in Bashu, which is modern-day Sichuan) → [see pic-huntun on top, yuntun lower left, chaoshou lower right](#)

[6] [Peach blossom cake](#), [osmanthus sweets](#), [walnut crisp](#), [cloud cake](#)

[7] Not literally his grandpa, of course; calling those older than you uncle/aunt/grandpa/grandma even without blood relation is a polite form of address

[8] Daily Chinese news programme aimed to "broadcast the voice of the party and the government, and disseminate news on things happening all around the world"

[9] Meridian points; Wuli is about ¾ down the upper arm, Quchi is in the elbow area to the side, and Shangyang is on the index finger right below the nail.

[10] The word for fat is 胖, and half-moon is 月半, resembling the word 胖.

[11] Vinegar = jealousy

[12] 月半[half moon] --> 胖 [fat]

[13] Orange tabbies are notorious for being very fat.

[14] The idiom means to die happy with no regrets, but Mo Ran took it literally.

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.120 Shizun Goes Into Seclusion

The first light of dawn painted red the clouds in the sky. It was still early, but there was already a large gathering of disciples outside the Red Lotus Pavilion, dressed in white mourning robes and lining the sides of the pathway with heads lowered and eyes downcast.

“Dong——dong——dong——”

The sound of the morning bell came from the Heaven-Piercing Tower, and several people could be seen walking slowly in the distance, carrying a coffin. Xue Zhengyong and Tanlang Elder walked in front, followed by Mo Ran and Xue Meng, with Shi Mei and a monk dressed in worn robes walking on either side. They approached slowly through the morning fog, treading along the dew-slick bluestone path.

The monk was holding a lantern. It was already light out, but the lantern's glow was no less brilliant, its golden radiance dazzling like summer blossoms.

The gathering of disciples lowered their heads solemnly, barely even daring to breathe. They had already heard that Master Huaizui of Wubei Temple had hastened over for the sake of Yuheng Elder, so this unassuming monk was probably him. The reverence that the juniors held toward such a person of legend far outweighed their curiosity, and none dared to take a good look as he made his way up the long mountain path. And so, with the tapping sounds of a monk stick and the glimpse of a pair of hemp-woven monk shoes from downcast eyes, the great master passed by with lightly billowing robes as the disciples stood reverently in his wake.

The coffin was carried steadily the whole way; it was not a burial, but a revival, and so no one wept. Arriving at the Red Lotus Pavilion, Huaizui looked around before saying, “Next to the lotus pond will do. There's an abundance of spiritual energy there, suitable for spells.”

“Alrighty, you heard the Great Master!” Xue Zhengyong led the others to go set the black ice coffin down by the lotus pond. “Just let me know if the Great Master needs anything else. Saving Yuheng is the same as saving half my life, I'll do anything I can to help!”

“Many thanks for Xue-zhangmen's kindness,” Huaizui said. “This humble monk has no needs at the moment, but will be sure to inform Zhangmen if any should arise in the future.”

“Sure, please do feel free.”

Huaizui put his palms together and bowed respectfully toward Xue Zhengyong with a smile, then turned to address the others present. “This incompetent monk will need five years to return Elder Chu's soul. In order to prevent disturbances, Red Lotus Pavilion will be closed to visitors from today until Elder Chu's revival in five years.”

Xue Meng had already been told about that before, but having Huaizui confirm once again that it was going to take five years for Shizun to wake up, the rims of his eyes still grew red as he silently lowered his head.

“If anyone wishes to say any parting words to Elder Chu, then please do so now. After today, it'll be a thousand-some days until you can meet again.”

So they went, one by one.

Xue Zhengyong and the elders went first, taking turns to stand solemnly before the coffin and say their farewells. Xue Zhengyong said, “Let us meet again soon.”

Tanlang said, “Wake up soon.”

Xuanji said, "Hope everything goes well."

Lucun said with a sigh, "I kinda envy you, frozen in time for five years like this and not having to look any older."

The other elders also each said their piece, some longer and some shorter, and it was Xue Meng's turn before long. Xue Meng had every intention to hold it together, but his emotions had always gotten the better of him, and this too was no exception as he started crying next to Chu Wanning's coffin.

He choked out between sobs while vigorously wiping away his tears, "Shizun, I'll work hard to train myself, even if you're not here. I definitely won't embarrass you at the upcoming Spiritual Mountain Competition. I'll tell you all about my high ranking when you wake up. My Shizun doesn't have losers as his disciples, after all."

Xue Zhengyong walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. Xue Meng didn't cling to his father like he usually did, but turned away with a snuffle instead. He didn't want to look like a useless spoiled child that needed his father for everything in front of his shizun.

Next was Shi Mei. Shi Mei's eyes were wet as well; he didn't say anything, only looked at Chu Wanning for a while with his head lowered, before quietly retreating to the side.

After he left, a light pink haitang blossom was placed gently into the coffin. The hand that placed it, although still somewhat youthful looking, was already long and slender.

Mo Ran stood by the coffin. A breeze danced past the surface of the water, carrying the softly sweet fragrance of the lotus flowers. The breeze tousled his fringe, but when he lifted his hand, it was to brush Chu Wanning's face.

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, looking like he had a lot that he wanted to say, but in the end, all he said was a soft, slightly hoarse, "I'll wait for you."

Wait for you for what?

He didn't say. He felt like he probably wanted to say 'I'll wait for you to wake up,' but those words seemed insufficient somehow. It felt like there was no way to express the feelings that were crowded to bursting in his chest, as if there was a pool of scalding hot lava in his heart, surging about madly and unable to find a way out, the force of the impact making him feel pained and panicked.

It felt like the impact would one day rip right through his heart, and then the lava would spill out uncontrollably, and the raging flow would melt him into ash.

But right now, he still wasn't sure what that burning feeling was. So he only said "I'll wait for you."

The Red Lotus Pavilion was closed off.

An enormous barrier came down like a gate separating life from death, denying anyone entry.

Henceforth, for the next five years, none would be privy to the fragrance of lotus blossoms in the summer, nor the quiet solitude of snow in the winter within the pavilion.

Bamboo leaves rustled in the wind and haitang blossoms drifted slowly down. From outside the Red Lotus Pavilion all the way to the main gate, disciples knelt down on the ground, with Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei at the head of this vast river.

Xue Zhengyong announced in a booming voice that rang through the skies and forests, "Wishing Yuheng Elder well in his seclusion."

The disciples repeated solemnly with their heads down, "Wishing Yuheng Elder well in his seclusion."

Thousands of voices rose, out of sync, rumbling forth from the cloud-shrouded Sisheng Peak and startling the birds into flight all around, birdcalls filling the skies as they circled the treetops, not daring to land. The mass of voices rose heavensward, rumbling like thunder through streaming clouds.

"Wishing Shizun well in his seclusion," Mo Ran said in a soft voice. Then bowed down to the ground for a long time.

Five years of waiting.

After Yuheng went into seclusion, his three disciples, unwilling to even temporarily take other elders as teacher, each worked hard to train and cultivate on their own.

For reasons of aptitude, cultivation path, and other such, Shi Mei and Xue Meng stayed at the peak, while Mo Ran chose to travel.

Mo Ran really did learn better through experience, but the other reason he made this choice was because so many things had turned out differently in this reborn life—aside from what had happened with Chu Wanning, that fake Gouchen worried him a great deal.

He suspected that the person behind everything might also have been reborn. After all, that person could already be said to be quite proficient in Zhenlong Chess Formation, but in the previous lifetime, even up until he took his own life, there had been no one else in the world capable of utilizing this forbidden technique to this extent.

He had no talent for ferreting out hidden identities, but ever since the battle at Butterfly Town, the entire cultivation world had kept its eyes peeled, just waiting for that person to slip up and expose themselves, so he didn't really need to get involved in this matter.

Mo Ran knew he wasn't exactly smart, that his strength lay in his abundance of spiritual energy and natural aptitude for cultivation. Since another confrontation in the future was inevitable, the best thing he could do right now was to get himself back up to his pre-rebirth battle prowess as soon as possible.

Last life, he had been a destroyer.
This life, he wanted to be a protector.

Not long after Chu Wanning had gone into seclusion, Mo Ran stood before the main gate of Sisheng Peak.

Carrying a traveling bag, just about to set off on his journey.

Only a few people came to see him off: Xue Zhengyong, Madam Wang, and Shi Mei.

Xue Zhengyong clapped him on the shoulder and said, a little awkwardly, "Meng-er won't be coming, he said..."

Mo Ran chuckled, "He said he's too busy training in the forest to come see me off, didn't he?"

"....." Feeling even more awkward, Xue Zhengyong couldn't help chiding, "That thoughtless brat!"

Mo Ran said with a smile, "He's got his heart set on first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, it's only natural that he be diligent about training. I'll leave it to him to earn glory in Shizun's name."

Xue Zhengyong looked at Mo Ran hesitantly, then said, "The Spiritual Mountain Competition is the foremost tournament in orthodox cultivation. I'm sure Ran-er will grow and learn much in his travels, but the competition probably won't allow the kind of assorted, admixed techniques you're going to end up learning. It'd be a pity if you end up missing out because of that."

Mo Ran replied, "My cousin's got it covered."

"Don't you want to make a name for yourself?"

Mo Ran actually burst out laughing at that.

Make a name for himself?

He had missed out on the Spiritual Mountain Competition in the last lifetime because he had committed some wrong and had been punished by confinement at the time, and he had always felt resentful about that. But that same thing seemed to him such a non-issue now—what did it even matter? He was someone who had already been through so much death and partings, awash in an endless tidal flood of trials and tribulations, who had gone from unresigned to expectant, from expectant to resentful, from resentful to relieved, from relieved to remorseful.

Here and now, what Mo Ran wanted was no longer beauties and fine wine, or the worship of the masses, much less things like revenge and the adrenaline rush of killing and razing.

He had already seen for himself the boundless opulence and luxuries at the apex of the world, and he had already grown tired of it all. He didn't want to go back there—it was cold, and there was no one by his side.

After all, he had once been Emperor Taxian-jun, had stood upon the mightiest mountain with the world in the palm of his hand, had seen all that there was to see. Of course he wouldn't care about some trifling thing like the measly applause and couple of cheers at the Spiritual Mountain Competition.

As for the ranking...

Whoever wanted it could have it.

"I'd rather do other things," Mo Ran said with a smile. "Xue Meng is a young master, and young masters have their way of living. But I'm just a hooligan, and hooligans have their own hooligan lives."

Madam Wang couldn't help the pity in her voice as she said, "Silly child, what are you saying? You're the same as Meng-er, what young master and hooligan?"

Mo Ran laughed 'hehe', but it was a little pained.

One was born into the lap of luxury while the other was low and petty by birth. Even though he had been immensely fortunate to end up here at Sishing Peak, he had still spent the first over ten years of his life in a murky haze, so how could they possibly be the same?

But seeing the gentle, concerned look on Madam Wang's face, he couldn't really say any of that, so he only nodded and said, "Auntie is right, I misspoke."

Madam Wang shook her head with a smile and handed him a small qiankun pouch with pollia flowers sewn on it. "You'll have to look after yourself while you travel. Take this, it's filled with medicines for injuries. I made them myself, so they're more effective than the kind you can buy in stores. Make sure not to lose it."

Mo Ran said gratefully, "Thanks a lot, Auntie."

Shi Mei said, "I don't really have anything to give you besides this jade pendant. Here, wear it, it keeps your spiritual core warm."

Taking it in hand, Mo Ran noted that the white jade was creamy smooth and warm to the touch, an exceedingly rare, high grade item. He hurriedly tucked the jade pendant back into Shi Mei's hand, saying, "I can't accept this, it's far too

valuable. And besides, my spiritual core is already fire elemental to start with, if it gets warmed any further... I might have a Qi deviation."

Shi Mei laughed, "Don't be silly, what Qi deviation?"

"Anyway, I'm not taking it." Mo Ran maintained. "You have a weak constitution, it'll do you more good than it would me."

"But I had someone get it from the Xuanyuan Pavilion auction just for you..."

Mo Ran felt all warm at his words, but more than that, felt his heart ache for him. "Then it must've been really expensive... this jade pendant really wouldn't do much for me, but it'd be great for you. Shi Mei, I appreciate the thought, but please keep it for yourself, and remember to wear it so it can nourish your spiritual energy."

Shi Mei still wanted to say something, but Mo Ran had already uncoiled the thin cord and put the jade pendant around his neck.

"Looks good," he said with a smile, then lifted a hand to pat Shi Mei on the shoulder. "Looks much better on you than it would on me. I'm such a rough and tumble kind of person, I'd probably break it in two days time."

"Ran-er is right, the jade pendant can be worn by anyone, but it's best for people with water elemental spiritual cores. Mei-er, just keep it."

Now that even Madam Wang has spoken up, of course Shi Mei would listen to her. He nodded and said to Mo Ran, "Then, take care of yourself."

"Don't worry, I'll write to you often."

Shi Mei was a bit sad at having to say goodbye soon, but he couldn't help laughing at that. "Only Shizun can read your chicken-scratch handwriting, you know."

Mo Ran wasn't sure what it was that he felt at the mention of Chu Wanning.

The hatred that used to gnaw at his very bones had dissipated, but the remorse was still there, like a wound scabbing over, a dull, itchy ache in his heart.

And so, with this feeling in his chest, Mo Ran set off down the mountain by himself.

"One, two, three..."

He counted in his head as he walked, head lowered.

"One hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three..."

Arriving at the foot of the mountain, he couldn't help looking back toward Sisheng Peak, high up and shrouded amongst the clouds, with no end to be seen to the long flight of stone steps. He murmured, "Three thousand seven hundred and ninety nine."

He had counted as he walked.

It was the number of steps up to the main gate, the number of steps that Chu Wanning had climbed that day, carrying him on his back.

He was sure that, for as long as he lived, he would never forget what Chu Wanning's hands had been like, cold as ice, chafed raw and bloody.

Truth of the matter was, whether a person did good or committed evil was rarely ever due to their inherent nature. Each person was like a plot of farmland; some were lucky, their fields sprinkled with seeds of grains, bearing an abundant harvest come autumn, paddies wafting with the soft fragrance of rice and fields

of wheat dancing in the wind like waves, and everything would be good and praise-worthy.

But some were not so lucky. Their fields were planted with the seeds of poppy flowers, and the spring breeze brought only the sin of intoxicated dissipation and euphoric decadence, filling the skies and covering the lands with that vile, bloody red and gold. The people abhorred it, cursed it, feared it, even as they indulged in its blissful stupor, rotted away in its filthy stench.

And in the end, the righteous and upstanding would gather together, set the field on fire, and as the twisting smoke rose into the sky, they would say he was a breeding ground of sin, that he was a demonic fiend, that he was vicious and ruthless, that he had no conscience, that he deserved it.

He convulsed in the blaze, crying out in pain as the poppy flowers shriveled up and turned into mud, the air choked with the smell of burning.

But he had once been a plot of good farmland too, had once wanted nothing more than water and sunlight too.

Just whom was it, who had planted that first seed of darkness, sowed the disaster that grew out of control?

The plot of land, once temperate and splendid, went up in flames and turned into dust.

Laid fallow.

He was a plot of unwanted, abandoned land.

He never thought that someone would come into his life and plough these fields again, give him another chance.

Chu Wanning.

It would be five years before he could see him again. Today was day one.

He suddenly found himself already missing Chu Wanning's face, his stern, angry, gentle, serious, steadfast face.

Mo Ran slowly closed his eyes.

He thought back to his lives, past and present, so many bygone happenings scattering like snow in the wind. He slowly realized that the heavenly rift incident had in fact been the biggest crossroads of his life.

In his last life, he had loved someone dearly.

Later, that person had given up his life, and he'd ended up in hell.

In this life, there was someone else who loved and protected him.

Later, that person had given up his life, and brought him back to the world of the living.

Ch.121 Shizun is the Real Zongshi ^[1]

On the eighth day after Mo Ran left, Xue Zhengyong received the first letter from him.

Messy scrawls on lined stationery that tried their best to be neat, but to no avail.

"I hope this letter finds Uncle well. I'm at Blossom Crossing today, and everything is going well. There was an evil spirit here a couple of days ago, but luckily no one was hurt. I've already taken care of the pesky water spirit, so the ferries are able to come and go safely again. The boatswain paid me five

hundred in silver notes, attached here with the letter. Please send Auntie and Shizun my regards.”

The hundred twentieth day, and the twenty second letter.

“I hope this letter finds Uncle well. I recently chanced across a high-quality spiritual stone that could be embedded into Xue Meng’s Longcheng blade to make it a peerless weapon. It still wouldn’t be a holy weapon, but it should make for a fine weapon regardless. Please send Auntie and Shizun my regards.”

The hundred thirtieth day, and the twenty fourth letter.

“I hope this letter finds Uncle well. Lately I’ve been cultivating at Snow Valley. It’s always cold here, and there are all kinds of unusual flora, of which the Frost Lotus is the rarest. I didn’t have the skills to get past the thousand year ape monster guarding the flower field at first, but I’ve made good progress in recent days and managed to pick a dozen or so, which I’ve attached with the letter. Please send Auntie and Shizun my regards.”

.....

The letters often came attached with some small playthings, medicinal herbs, or spiritual stones.

Aside from writing to Xue Zhengyong, Mo Ran also wrote privately to Shi Mei. The contents of these letters were mostly just about the places he went and the things he saw, asking how he was and reminding him to dress warmly, and other such trivial things.

The brushstrokes on paper were a mess full of mistakes at first, but as time went on, although the handwriting wasn’t exactly good-looking, it did gradually straighten into something neat and mature, with fewer and fewer errors.

A year went by in the blink of an eye.

One day, as Xue Zhengyong was savoring the fresh spring tea, another letter from Mo Ran came.

He read the letter with a smile before passing it to Madam Wang, whose lips curled into a smile as well as she read. “His handwriting has certainly gotten better.”

“Doesn’t it look just like a certain someone’s?”

“Whose?”

Xue Zhengyong blew on his tea leaves, then retrieved a copy of “Variorum of Ancient Barriers” from his desk. “Compare it with Yuheng’s writing. Seven-parts alike, hm?”

Madam Wang looked through the scroll and said with surprise, “It really is.”

“He took Yuheng as teacher when he first came to Sisheng Peak, after all. Yuheng had him read on his own at first, but he barely even knew any of the characters, so then Yuheng spent quite some days teaching him, starting with his name, then simple things, and then more complex things.” Xue Zhengyong shook his head. “He never did take it seriously back then, always putting down some chicken-scratch just to get it over with, but look at him now, finally learning to write decently.”

Madam Wang said with a smile, “Going out to see the world is doing him wonders, he seems much more mature now.”

Xue Zhengyong was smiling as well as he said, “Wonder what he’s gonna be like after the five years of travelling around. How old will he be then? Twenty two?”

“Twenty two.”

Xue Zhengyong sighed with a hint of regret. “I thought Yuheng would be able to watch them grow into their twenties, but the heavens had their own plans.”

The heavens had their own plans, that's what Mo Ran thought too.

He travelled all over the place, from the misty rains of Jiangnan to the south to the Sanguan Pass of Saibei to the north, sat by the Toulao River and chugged rice wine in the summer, huddled by the campfire and listened to a tune on the Qiang flute in the winter.

Last lifetime, after declaring himself emperor, he had owned all the lands under the skies yet never once took the time to go travel them, to go see the lanterns and fishing boats of the east or the underground aqueducts of the west; never bothered to notice the dark, toughened, and cracked soles of a porter's feet who carried load-laden poles across cobblestone roads; never stopped to listen to the singing of the young trainees in the opera troupe, their voices pitched like ripping silk, rising into the skies:

"Such brilliant splendor, blooms flourishing abound, against a backdrop desolate, of walls ruined and decrepit..."

He wasn't Taxian-jun anymore, wouldn't ever be Taxian-jun again in this life. He was——

"Da-gege." Came the tender voice of a child from the bookstore. "Da-gege, can you save this birdy? Its wing is broken, I, I don't know what to do."

"Little Xianjun." Came the old, raspy voice of Shijiu Village's village head. "Thank you, thank you. All of us here are too old to do anything about evil spirits; if not for you, we would've had to abandon our homes and go elsewhere. This old one... this old one will never forget Xianjun's kindness for as long as he lives."

"Kind person." Came the trembling voice of a beggar woman on the street. "Kind person, my child and I haven't had a real meal for days, please, won't you be so kind..."

Mo Ran closed his eyes.
And opened them again.

Because there was someone calling for him.
"Mo-zongshi."

Stung by the form of address, he looked up toward the suntanned bloke calling for him and said with helpless resignation, "I'm no zongshi, that's my Shizun. Please don't call me that anymore."

The bloke scratched his head bashfully. "Sorry about that. I know you don't like it, it's just a force of habit cause everyone in the village calls you that."

Mo Ran had been staying in a small village near the border of the lower cultivation realm lately. The village was often troubled by snow ghosts, owing to the snowy mountain that towered some kilometers outside. They were only minor nuisances with little spiritual power, and one of Shizun's Holy Night Guardians would have more than sufficed to take care of them, but the village was far too remote for the use of Holy Night Guardians to have spread this far. And so, with no other choice, Mo Ran could only try to make one himself, following Shizun's diagrams.

He'd failed many times before finally managing to make a Holy Night Guardian. It wasn't as good-looking as Shizun's, or as nimble, but the creaking wooden golem was serviceable.

The people of the backwater village, delighted with this curious new thing, had started calling him Mo-zongshi. Mo Ran felt nothing but awkwardness at this turn of events.

But the more awkward thing was yet to come.

One particular evening, with half the sky dyed red by the setting sun, he was walking along a busy alleyway by an apricot grove, on his way back from lectures at an academy on Taishan Mountain, when he suddenly heard someone calling.

“Chu-zongshi!”

Mo Ran’s head whipped around at the name immediately and without thinking, and then he almost wanted to laugh at himself as his brain caught up. There were plenty of cultivators out there with the surname Chu; he really was getting ahead of himself, to think that his Shizun had somehow woken up already.

Of course not.

He shook his head with a smile and was just about to turn back around when the call came again: “Chu-zongshi!”

“.....”

Holding his pile of books, Mo Ran squinted into the crowd. There was someone waving at him, but the person was too far for him to see his face. He could only vaguely see the clothing and build—it was a young man dressed in blue cultivator garb, with a bow on his back and a wolf by his side.

The person walked over briskly, and the both of them were caught by surprise when they were close enough to see the other’s face.

“You’re...”

“Mo Ran.” He reacted before the other did with a simple nod of his head, since his hands were occupied with the books, and his gaze paused curiously on the young man’s face for a moment. “Fancy meeting Nangong-gongzi here.”

As it turned out, the one calling him “Chu-zongshi” was none other than the gongzi of Rufeng Sect, Nangong Si.

This guy had died too early in the past life for Mo Ran to have met him back then, but Chu Wanning was different. Chu Wanning used to be a guest instructor at Rufeng Sect, so it was only natural that Nangong Si knew him well. As Mo Ran looked him over, the quiver in Nangong Si’s hand caught his eyes.

It was an old quiver made of cloth, so worn that the camellias embroidered on it had faded in color, their once-vibrant petals yellowed by time, as if even embroidered flowers couldn’t escape the fate of wilting away.

Nangong Si was neat and well-dressed, save for that threadbare, visibly-patched quiver. Mo Ran could tell that the quiver was precious to him—after all, didn’t everyone have a couple of sentimental objects? Even the most bodacious person was sure to have memories they held dear.

No one was heartless, however they might appear; nothing was that simple.

Nangong Si’s brows furrowed. “Mo Ran... ah, I remember now. Chu-zongshi’s disciple?”

“Mhm.”

That being the case, Nangong Si’s attitude grew somewhat milder, saying, “My bad, your clothing and silhouette looked rather like the zongshi’s from a distance, so I thought he had come out of seclusion ahead of time without me knowing.”

Mo Ran pulled his gaze away from the quiver, tactfully not prying as he replied without missing a beat, “Hearing your yelling earlier, I also thought

Shizun had come out of seclusion ahead of time without me knowing.”

Nangong Si bursted out laughing. Maybe because he was highborn, but even when guffawing so, his handsome features still managed to retain a measure of arrogance. And this arrogance of his was different from Xue Meng’s—Xue Meng’s arrogance was a conceited pride born of skill and talent, while Nangong Si’s was a touch more belligerent, a headstrong, fiery kind of arrogance.

But he was born in the lap of luxury and so the belligerence only made him seem wild and audacious rather than frightening.

Mo Ran couldn’t help thinking to himself that Nangong Si really was a spirited stallion^[2].

He was still musing when he heard Nangong Si say, “I was absolutely wretched when Chu-zongshi lost his life during the Heavenly Rift. Thankfully he was able to be revived under the great master’s guidance. I’ll definitely go pay a visit to Sisheng Peak once he wakes up.”

“We’ll be looking forward to it.”

Nangong Si waved his hand nonchalantly, and then, noting the books in Mo Ran’s hands, asked curiously, “What’s Mo-xiong up to?”

“Studying.”

Nangong Si thought that surely he’d be studying some complicated, esoteric scrolls, only to find out on second glance that it was only simple classics like “The Untrammelled Traveler” and “Classic of Rites”. He was dumbfounded for a second before saying, “These... these are all fundamental readings, books I’ve learned by heart since I was little, what’re you doing reading *these*?”

Mo Ran’s gaze was even and unashamed as he replied, “When I was little, I didn’t even know how to write my own name.”

“Ahem...” Nangong Si felt a little awkward. “You studying at an academy?”

“Yeah. I was collecting spiritual stones for cultivational purposes on Taishan Mountain a little while back, and happened to see that classes were starting at Apricot Grove Academy. I have some free time right now, so I’ve been going to the lectures.”

Nangong Si nodded, and seeing that it was getting late, said, “Say, Mo-xiong hasn’t had dinner yet, right? Since you’re here in Rufeng Sect’s province, and Chu-zongshi’s disciple to boot, let me be a proper host. I’m actually on my way to a nearby restaurant to meet up with a companion right now, so how about it? Join us for a drink?”

Mo Ran didn’t have any plans anyway, so he said, “I’d be honored^[3]”

“We’re headed to Wuyu Pavilion then, one of Linyi’s most famous restaurants. They make the best braised pork intestine^[4] out there. You ever heard of them?” Nangong Si chatted as they walked.

“Of course I have.” Mo Ran grinned. “They’re one of the upper cultivation realm’s top restaurants. You sure know how to pick the place, Nangong-gongzi.”

“I didn’t pick the place.”

“Oh? Who did, then?”

“My companion did,” Nangong Si replied.

Having already lived through one lifetime, Mo Ran knew some things about the complicated relations in Rufeng Sect. He thought with surprise, though he didn't say it aloud—was Ye Wangxi here as well?

He followed Nangong Si up the stairs, pushing aside the pearl curtain to step into the private booth of the restaurant, and nearly choked when he saw whom it was waiting inside——

It was Song Qitong, dressed in light silks and standing by the window, gazing at the peach blossoms outside. She turned around at the sound of them entering, the golden adornments that dangled by her temples swaying gently and catching the light, making her skin seem all the fairer and her lips all the redder, beautiful beyond words.

Mo Ran's foot, mid-step into the room, subconsciously pulled back.

He wondered if it was too late to tell Nangong Si that he didn't like Shandong cuisine, and especially disliked braised pork intestine.

Ch.122 Shizun's Reflection

"Here, Mo-xiong, let me introduce you. This is Song Qitong, a little shimei from my sect."

In the end Mo Ran forced himself to sit down at the table and bear with Nangong Si's enthusiastic introductions. Song Qitong, Song Qitong, he knew well how many moles there were on her back and just where the birthmarks were on her thighs, as if he needed Nangong Si to introduce.

But he schooled his expression and nodded with much restraint. "Miss Song."

"This is Chu-zongshi's disciple, Mo Weiyu of Sisheng Peak. You likely saw him back at Butterfly Town, but there were a lot of people there, so you probably don't remember."

Song Qitong smiled and stood to offer a deferential obeisance, saying, "Qitong is pleased to meet Mo-xianjun."

"....."

Mo Ran remained sitting, levelling an unfathomable gaze at her for quite a while before finally saying, briskly, "Likewise."

Truth be told, Mo Ran was beyond disgusted with this wife of his from the past life. And, more than that, this disgust wasn't even something that had emerged only after his rebirth, but had in fact already permeated irreversibly into his very bones in the past life.

The last couple of times he'd seen her, it had always been from a distance, so he'd only had to deal with a bearable amount of repulsion before. Unlike today.

She was a fragile woman, delicate and soft-spoken in all that she did. She was like an unripe fruit upon the branch in early autumn, hidden behind the luxuriant leaves, with a muted scent less fragrant than that of the surrounding blossoms and an understated color not overly loud, but was very likeable, a slim yet full figure that held endless gentleness and tender young love^[5], ready to yield up its sweetly sour juice to the smallest bite.

Only after biting deep to the core would the worm be discovered, dead and rotting within, pungent and festering, the fruit spotted with mold.

But then again, compared to himself, it wasn't like the Song Qitong of the last lifetime had really done anything too abhorrent. All she had done was betray Rufeng Sect, which had saved her life. All she had done was offer up Ye Wangxi to save herself when Mo Ran was massacring the city. All she had done was doll herself up even as Linyi was being turned into mountains of corpses and oceans of blood, overjoyed that she had garnered Mo Ran's favor and eager to serve her new master.

All she had done was vilify Ye Wangxi after the massacre was over in order to show her sincerity, weeping pitifully right in front of Ye Wangxi's dead body that could never again speak, about how cruel he had been to her, how he had tormented her every day, how miserable her life would have been if Mo Ran hadn't come.

And?

Mo Ran pondered in silence.
What else had she even done?

Nangong Si was an impatient person. A couple of the dishes were taking a while to come out, so he went to prod them along. And so the husband and wife of a previous lifetime were left alone in the room.

"Mo-gongzi, a toast, if you will." She filled his cup with a smile, a bit of forearm peeking out from her flowing sleeves in the process, revealing a vibrant dot of cinnabar on her wrist.

Mo Ran lifted his hand and grabbed her wrist for no discernible reason.

She made a surprised sound and lifted her eyes to look at him, fright apparent in those delicate, dew-laden eyes. "Mo-gongzi, what are you..."

Mo Ran stared at her face for a while before dropping his gaze to her fair, slender hands.

"You have nice hands," he said quietly after a long pause, expression cool and distant. "Does Miss Song know how to play chess?"

"A, a little bit."

"Hands this nice must be quite adept at chess," he continued coldly. Outside came the sound of Nangong Si's footsteps, and his wolf began barking by the door.

"Excuse me." Mo Ran let go of Song Qitong's slender wrist, then carefully wiped his hand off with a handkerchief.

Outside, the rays of the setting sun were a brilliant splash of color upon the dusky sky. Inside, a spread of sumptuous feast for a pleasant spring eve.

Mo Ran wore his usual expression, as if nothing had happened at all. Song Qitong had been scorned for no apparent reason, but she had always been good at enduring, even getting up during the meal to refill Mo Ran's cup once.

Not wanting to drink the wine she poured, he left the cup untouched for the remainder of the meal.

Nangong Si spoke, "Mo-xiong, the Spiritual Mountain Competition is coming up soon. You're Chu-zongshi's disciple; make sure you don't embarrass him. You ready?"

"I'm not going."

"...Surely you're joking?"

"I'm serious," Mo Ran said with a laugh. "My cousin's got it covered. Every sect's gonna be there, I don't feel like crowding around with everybody."

Nangong Si didn't seem to believe him still, piercing brown eyes narrowing at him like those of an eagle.

But Mo Ran's eyes were open and unreserved as he returned his gaze.

The eagle stared at the rock for a while, until it was satisfied that it really was only a rock, not hiding a cunning rabbit or a sly serpent.

He leaned back into his chair, twirling his chopsticks between his fingers, and suddenly grinned. "Interesting. So I won't be seeing you at the Spiritual Mountain Competition then?"

"You will not."

Nangong Si put a hand to his forehead and snorted out a laugh. "Chuzongshi's disciple must really be something, to snub such a prestigious competition."

"....."

Mo Ran thought to himself, bloody hell, how was he supposed to explain *this*? It wasn't like he could tell Nangong Si that, no no, that's not it, he was actually a thirty-something old ghost that had come back to life; here, let Taxianjun play with all these little brats that are still wet behind the ears, while a bunch of sect leaders that had either been killed or beaten up by him in the past life sat around in a circle around them on those high platforms, grading his performance with their little scorecards.

...What a joke.

Clearing his throat, he said, "It's not that I think it's beneath me or anything, more like I'm no good with orthodox cultivation techniques, and don't wanna risk embarrassing Shizun with my shallow learnings if I were to go. Someone skilled like Nangong-gongzi is much more suited to the competition, so please spare me your teasing."

If a guileless little birdy like Xue Meng had heard that, he probably would've been overjoyed, like Mo Ran had petted the right spot. But Nangong Si hailed from Rufeng Sect and its complicated internal politics, and had lost his mother since young to boot. His life had been far less simple, and so he only smiled a little at Mo Ran's praise, and did not let it get to his head.

He took several big gulps of wine, the jut of his throat bobbing, before wiping his mouth with his sleeve and saying, "Since Mo-gongzi won't be participating, who do you think is going to win this round, from a bystander's clear perspective?"

"....." *You sure did ask the right fucking person*, Mo Ran thought.

Who would know better than him just who was going to win? Other than that fake Gouchen, who was in all likelihood also a reborn person, he was the only one in the world who knew just how the Spiritual Mountain Competition was going to play out.

The winner was...

"Nangong Si."

The pearl curtain of the private room was abruptly swept to the side; a face could be seen in the swaying light that followed, half hidden in the shadows. Before either of the men in the room could even react, Song Qitong had

already leapt to her feet as if stung, a pitiful-looking panic on her face as she lowered her head and said in an apologetic tone, “Ye, Ye-gongzi.”

The newcomer stood tall and straight, dressed in black robes trimmed with muted gold and with bracers fastened around the wrists, making for a lean, lithe figure. Three-parts elegant and seven-parts handsome, who else could it be but Ye Wangxi?

“I wasn’t calling you.” Ye Wangxi pushed aside the pearl curtain and stepped into the room without so much as sparing her a glance, his eyes remaining fixed on one person the whole time, seemingly cold, but with a subtle flicker of something else. “Nangong Si, I was calling you. Look up if you can hear me.”

Nangong Si did not look up, instead speaking to Song Qitong, “What are you doing standing? Sit down.”

“That’s alright, Nangong-gongzi, my status is low, I should stand.”

Nangong Si flew abruptly into a rage, yelling, “SIT DOWN!”

Song Qitong flinched, holding onto the edge of the table and hesitating. Ye Wangxi didn’t want to stall on this, and so said in a cold voice, “Listen to him.”

“Thank you, Ye-gongzi...”

Ignoring Song Qitong, Ye Wangxi said, “Nangong Si, just how long do you plan to drag out this farce for? The Sect Leader is so incensed he’s about to go mad. Get up and go back with me.”

“That suits me just fine. I’ll just take him for a madman, and he can take me for dead! There’s nothing to talk about even if I do go back; I will not set half a foot into Rufeng Sect so long as he doesn’t withdraw the order.” Nangong Si spoke, clearly and with a pause between each letter, “Ye, gong, zi, kindly see yourself out.”

“You——” Ye Wangxi’s hands tightened into fists, his entire body trembling minutely. Watching from the side, Mo Ran felt like he might kick the table over, grab Nangong Si and bodily drag him off at any moment, but Ye Wangxi was a gentleman after all, and managed to forcibly suppress the raging flames of his anger.

“Nangong Si.” When he spoke after a long moment of silence, it was in a hoarse, exhausted voice that was at odds with his tall and straight appearance. “Do you really have to go this far?”

“So what if I do?”

Ye Wangxi closed his eyes and let out an imperceptible sigh before slowly opening them again. Standing in front of the table, he finally turned to shoot a glance toward Mo Ran.

In the same way that a family’s dirty laundry is not to be aired out in public, a sect’s internal matters are likewise kept from outsiders. Tactfully, Mo Ran got up and bowed toward Ye Wangxi, saying, “Actually, I just remembered that I have an appointment to go pick up some clothes at the clothing store, I really shouldn’t keep the shopkeeper waiting, so I’ll head off first.”

Ye Wangxi nodded toward him. “Many thanks, Mo-gongzi.”

“Not at all, take your time chatting.”

Mo Ran happened to glance at Ye Wangxi as he walked past. Ye Wangxi stood tall and straight like a sturdy pine tree, holding himself with poise as he

always did. But up close, Mo Ran could see a faint redness at the corners of his eyes, like he had been crying just before coming here.

Mo Ran suddenly felt like Ye Wangxi's silent forbearance was a bit like Chu Wanning's.

Moved by a sudden impulse, he couldn't help turning to address Nangong Si, "Nangong-gongzi, I may not know what's happening between you and Ye-gongzi, but I do know that he's always been genuinely good to you. So if you're willing, please do have an open chat with him, don't hold back the things you should say."

But Nangong Si had little appreciation for his advice, and in the heat of the moment, even disregarded the finer points of politeness to say in a cold voice, "Mind your own business."

"....." This short-lived punk!

Mo Ran left. He hadn't even gotten down the stairs when he heard Nangong Si's furious bellowing from the room as the wolf-like young man tore into Ye Wangxi's soul with sharp fangs, demanding——

"Ye Wangxi! What sorcery did you use on my father to make him think more highly of you than he does me?! Go back with you? What the fuck for?! All my life, when have I ever been given a choice in anything? Huh? Tell me, Ye Wangxi, just what... just what exactly do you all take me for!!!!"

There came the crash of tables and chairs toppling over, and the smashing sounds of plates and cups falling to the floor.

The maidservants in the corridor were each and all startled by the noise, and a couple of the other guests peeked out from their own rooms.

"What's going on?"

"Aiyo, what a temper, hope they don't smash the place."

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, turning to look over his shoulder toward the end of the corridor again.

He heard Ye Wangxi's voice, dry and lifeless like a withered leaf in autumn.

"Nangong, if it's my presence back home that's upsetting you, then I'll leave, and you'll never have to see me again."

"....."

"So go back," Ye Wangxi said. "I'm begging you."

If he hadn't heard it with his own ears, Mo Ran never would have believed that such an upright person as Ye Wangxi would ever say something so weak as "begging".

His impression of Ye Wangxi was that of an immovable person of integrity, an invincible force on the battlefield; it was far easier for Mo Ran to picture him bleeding than crying, to envision him dying than kneeling.

But on this very day, in this very restaurant, with Song Qitong there to watch, he said to someone, *I'm begging you.*

Mo Ran closed his eyes.

In the span of a person's life, just how many things does he never find out?

No one stood naked in front of others. Everyone hid their bodies under clothes, their feelings behind words and expressions. Everyone wrapped themselves up in layers upon layers, with only their heads and necks visible like a flowering branch peeking out, offering the world only a painted face with an

unambiguous expression, each playing their own role—for life was but a play, the roles definite and clear-cut: *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, and *chou*.^[6]

If someone had always played the *sheng* role, how could they simply accept a change of costume and a repaint of makeup to play the *dan* role instead?

But in the dead of night when the cymbals ceased and the lute faded, when everyone washed off the thick layer of makeup, and as the colorful wash water carried away the distinctly painted faces they'd worn during the day, revealing the unfamiliar features beneath.

It would turn out that the *huadan* was actually a gallant young man, and the *wusheng* had a pair of tender, infatuated eyes.^[7]

Mo Ran returned to the small room he was staying in for the time being, deep in thought—he had lived two lifetimes, but just how much did he really understand people? And what of himself?

Just one Chu Wanning was already enough to make his heart grow and then die, only to revive again. Chu Wanning...

His thoughts drifted to the way Nangong Si had mistaken him for Chu Wanning earlier today. He thought it funny—how did such a mix-up even happen?

But as he washed up in front of the copper mirror, he suddenly found that the person reflected therein had his hair done up in a high ponytail and wore a simple white cultivator robe.

He had put his hair up in the ponytail on an offhanded whim this morning; as for the robe, it was because his old clothes had felt a little tight a couple days ago, so he'd gone to the store to pick out a new set, and the white robe had caught his eye while walking through the store, so he bought it and put it on without really thinking about it, without considering why the robe had been pleasing to his eyes.

Only now, looking into the mirror, did he suddenly realize the reason why.

It was because this white robe was so similar to the one that Chu Wanning had once worn.

The mirror was a dull yellow, the past life was like a dream; looking at the person in the mirror, Mo Ran felt like he was looking at a fragment of Chu Wanning, a delirium of him, through this muddy color, muted as if in a dream.

The water that he had washed his face with and not yet wiped dry streamed along the gradually maturing lines of his jaw and dripped down his chin.

Standing there in front of the mirror, he vaguely realized that, just like how his Holy Night Guardian was clumsily trying to imitate Chu Wanning's Holy Night Guardian, he himself was also clumsily trying to imitate his shizun.

Unconsciously, Mo Ran had been looking for Chu Wanning's shadow in the world; unable to find him, he had instead slowly become him.

*Time marched on. And I, due to remorse, or perhaps something else—
I couldn't see you, but always I thought about what you would do if you were
here; what would make you smile, what would make you mad.*

*I thought about you before doing anything, tried to make you proud in
everything that I did.*

*I thought, "If you were here, and I did this, would you nod? Would you be
willing to praise me a little, say I did okay?"*

*Day after day I thought about this, until it had permeated into my very bones,
become second nature. That's why, later on, I didn't even realize—*

—That as the days passed by, I had grown into the you in my heart.

Ch.123 Shizun Visits My Dream, for He Knows I Think of Him Often

“Zhao-daozhang, Li-daozhang, have you both seen the rankings yet? The black horse that came out of the Spiritual Mountain Competition this time is really something!”

Inside Pearl Teahouse, a couple of wandering cultivations were having an excited discussion over a platter of peanuts and a pot of hot tea, the topic of discussion being the current Jianghu news that’s even hotter than the tea.

“Of course I have! No one expected the winner to be Sisheng Peak, that sect from the lower cultivation realm. All the old fogies from the upper cultivation realm have got their knickers in a twist now! Especially Rufeng Sect, aiyo, their ancestors are turning in their graves! What was the winner’s name again, Xue Fenghuang [Phoenix]?”

“Ah? Hahahaha, Xue Fenghuang? Old Zhao please you’re gonna make me burst a lung laughing, Son of the Phoenix is his nickname! His surname is Xue, given name Meng, courtesy name Ziming, and his old man is Xue Zhengyong. Like father, like son, this Xue Ziming is quite impressively skilled!”

There was a tall man in a cape sitting by the fireplace, minding his own business drinking butter tea. Overhearing their conversation, the cup by the man’s lips stilled and remained there as he uttered a quiet “Hm?”

“They seriously weren’t kidding when they called him Son of the Phoenix. Every other little young master in there had a holy weapon, but he shows up with just a curved blade and cuts off all their escape routes, freakin’ incredible.”

“Did you forget whom his master is? It’s only natural that Yuheng of the Night Sky’s disciple doesn’t play games!”

“To be honest though, I think Xue Ziming’s win was a near thing. Surely you’ve heard that Xue Ziming and Nangong Si were evenly matched in the doubles; if not for that girly on his team dragging him down, heh, could’ve gone either way if you ask me.”

At these words, the man who had been listening intently finally set down the cup of tea he had been holding up without drinking.

He turned his head, eyes clear as autumn waters yet intense as lightning—strikingly good looks to be sure. He flashed a smile at the chatting cultivators and joined their conversation. “Excuse me, I’ve been cultivating in the mountains these last couple of days. It’s hard to even tell what day it is up there so I ended up missing the Spiritual Mountain Competition. I happened to overhear from your conversation that Xue Meng won first place... I was wondering if you would mind telling me some more?”

Those cultivators were only too eager to have an audience, promptly and enthusiastically gesturing Mo Ran over and making room for him to sit with them.

And Mo Ran knew his manners too—he was much more mature now than when he had first left to travel. He had the lady boss of the teahouse refill six teapots with Lingshan Rain and ordered candied jujubes, tart kernels, sweet liquor cherries, and snake gall melon seeds to share with everyone before smiling and saying, “Xue Ziming is the Darling of the Heavens, so for him to take

first even without a holy weapon isn't much of a surprise. But I heard mention that Nangong Si of Rufeng Sect had a lady on his team in the doubles...?"

Being a bunch of guys, they were more than happy to talk about ladies, even if the lady wasn't theirs.

"That he did. Truly a case of the hero's ambition sunk in the beauty's bosom, else with Nangong Si's skills, who knows if Xue Ziming would be able to get the upper hand."

"I see. Interesting." That wasn't what happened in the last lifetime, when Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si had jointly won first place. Mo Ran originally thought that it was due to that little phoenix Xue Meng being spurred by Chu Wanning's death to really apply himself and soar to success, but it seemed that Xue Meng's side of things wasn't the only variable involved here.

"Who might this lady be?"

"The lass was named Song... something Tong, don't remember exactly, sure was pretty though. She's got the Rufeng Sect's little young master wrapped around her pinky, by the looks of it."

"Pretty's an understatement, astoundingly beautiful is more like it. If I were Nangong Si, I'd give up first place at Spiritual Mountain just to make the pretty thing happy too."

Mo Ran: "....."

As he thought.

The Spiritual Mountain Competition included three events—singles, doubles, and battle royale—with the scores being averaged across the three to determine the ultimate winner.

In the last lifetime, Xue Meng and Shi Mei had faced off against Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi in the doubles event. Ye Wangxi had gone on to become the second strongest person in the world, outdone only by Chu Wanning, so the outcome of that match need not be said. Heaven knows what went wrong in this lifetime, for Nangong Si to bring that hindrance Song Qitong along instead of teaming up with Ye Wangxi...

Mo Ran set down his cup of tea and rubbed his temple.
What the hell had that guy been thinking?

"Ah, women; even that wild horse Nangong Si got tamed in no time." One of them lamented thus, and the others broke into hoots of laughter.

Mo Ran couldn't help asking, "What about Ye Wangxi?"

"Who?"

Mo Ran repeated, "Ye Wangxi."

The lack of recognition on their faces left a bad taste in Mo Ran's mouth. This person was a war god who'd given Mo Ran no end of troubles in the last lifetime... how could you lot possibly not know of him!

So he gestured while explaining, "The other gongzi from Rufeng Sect; long legs, tall, good temper, doesn't talk much, uses a sword and..." Looking at all their blank expressions, Mo Ran sighed and finished the description, despite already having guessed the outcome.

"And a bow."

"Don't know 'em."

“Never heard of this person.”

“Bro, where’d you hear about this guy from? Rufeng Sect sent sixteen disciples to the Spiritual Mountain Competition, not a single one of them named Ye.”

Sure enough, Ye Wangxi hadn’t participated in this lifetime.

Mo Ran fell silent for a moment. He thought back to that day at the restaurant, when Ye Wangxi had said to Nangong Si, “You come back, I’ll leave,” he suddenly felt a little uneasy, and a little pained.

It couldn’t be, right?

Had Ye Wangxi actually left Rufeng Sect?

In the past life, right before his end, Ye Wangxi had said to the executioner that he wanted to be buried at Rufeng Sect’s Tomb of Heroes, next to Nangong Si’s grave. Mo Ran sighed at the recollection—how had things ended up like this? The slight changes, drop after drop, had built up into growing ripples.

The world had so turned on its head that what should’ve been ocean had become land.

So it was that the turn of fates could be violent as a raging storm. That a change of heart, a recantation of past hatred, could only be bought with hot blood spilt and bitter tears shed.

As it had with Chu Wanning and himself.

But the turn of fates could also be a breathless silence, as it had with Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si.

Maybe it had been only that one day at the inn, when Nangong Si had allowed Ye Wangxi’s group to stay the night. Maybe Nangong Si had gotten thirsty, late at night, and gone downstairs for some tea, and just so happened to run into a pitiful Song Qitong.

Maybe Song Qitong had poured him a cup of water, or maybe she had tripped when going up the stairs due to the injury on her leg; there was no way to know.

It could have even been that he had just been too boorish when drinking the water, and gotten some on the wide collars of his robes, and she had gingerly offered him a handkerchief.

With nothing between them at the time, Nangong Si had probably just uttered a simple thanks.

But none of them could have known, as the Northern Dipper swept across the night sky and the stars of Shen and Shang rose and sank, never to meet, that their lives had been irreversibly changed because of that handkerchief, that cup of water, that uttered thanks. None of them had heard the rumble of fate:

Nangong Si yawned as he walked up the stairs.

Song Qitong stood there, watching him go.

And Ye Wangxi, in his room, lit a candle to continue reading an unfinished book.

In the past life, Mo Ran had fancied himself all-powerful and all-knowing, had thought he’d seen through life itself.

Only now did he finally realize that they were, all of them, only duckweeds adrift in this world, scattered about by rain and wind both, little green wisps of souls that could be so easily crushed by a stray tossed pebble.

He had been so very lucky, to have drifted away yet somehow returned to Chu Wanning’s side.

To still be able to do his filial duty for his shizun, to still be able to say to Chu Wanning, “Sorry I let you down.”

Finishing his tea, he bid the others farewell.

The wind had picked up outside, with rain soon to follow.

Mo Ran put on his cape and walked into the depths of the thick forest.

His silhouette grew more and more distant, more and more faint, until it was no more than a small dot in the twilight, like a drop of ink spreading out in a pool of water, thinning out and disappearing.

Rrrumble——!

Lightning flashed in the horizon as thunder cracked through the darkened skies, and the rain came down in a torrential downpour.

“It’s raining.” Someone peeked out from the teahouse to look, only to draw back inside at the intensity of the thunder.

“That sure is a thunderstorm... damn, I laid millet out to dry in the sun, it’s gonna get all soaked now.”

“Oh well, hey boss lady, can we get another pot of tea here? Might as well wait for it to clear up before heading home.”

Mo Ran walked briskly through the rain, ran through the rain, fled through the rain, hid in the rain from the thirty-two nonsensical years of his past life.

He didn’t know if the torrential rain could wash away his sins; Chu Wanning had forgiven him, but he had not forgiven himself. His heart felt heavy, so heavy that he might suffocate from it.

He wanted to use the rest of his life to do good, to make amends.

But could the downpour in the rest of his life truly wash away the evil in his bones, the filth in his blood?

He wished only that this rain could fall for five years straight.

He wished only that, when Chu Wanning awakened, he would be able to stand before his shizun a little cleaner, and then cleaner still.

He didn’t want to still be this dirty when the time came, dirty like mud, like dust, like the grime on the bottom of a porter’s shoes, dirt under a beggar’s nails.

He wished only that, before Chu Wanning awakened, he could be a little better, and then better still.

Only then could the worst, worst disciple in the world maybe summon up the feeble courage to call out to the best, best shizun in the world.

That night, Mo Ran fell sick.

He had always been healthy and strong, but someone like this, if they were to get sick, would get terribly, horribly sick.

He lay in bed, sleeping bundled beneath a thick quilt. He dreamt of things from his past life, dreamt of how he had tormented Chu Wanning before, dreamt of Chu Wanning struggling beneath himself, of Chu Wanning dying in his arms. Waking with a start to the howling wind and cold rain outside, he felt around for the flint to light the candle, but no matter how many times he tried, the flint wouldn’t spark.

He threw the flint and steel aside in a fit of frustration. He buried his face in his hands, rubbing forcefully; pulled harshly at his own hair, the jut of his throat moving as he let out a grief-stricken howl like that of a pained beast.

He had escaped death, escaped blame, but in the end couldn’t escape his own conscience.

It was scary, being unable to even tell dreams from reality sometimes, continuously having to check whether he was asleep or awake.

It hurt, feeling like his very soul had split into two, that of the past lifetime and that of the current lifetime, the two souls tearing into one another, one cursing the other for being a ruthless lunatic with hands covered in blood, the other

snapping back just as fiercely, demanding to know why the former was going about like he hadn't done anything wrong, how did he even have the nerve to walk this earth.

The soul of the present bellowed at the soul of the past:

Mo Weiyu, Taxian-jun, you scum of the earth, why did you commit such sins?! How am I supposed to make up for all that you've done?!

I want to start over, but why must you haunt me so, in my dreams, in my drunken stupors, in the dimming light of fading candles, jumping out when I least expect it to curse me with that twisted face of yours!

Cursing me with a thousand deaths, cursing me with retribution and comeuppance.

You say that this is all just a dream that will one day shatter. You sneer that sooner or later I will wake up to find myself back at Wushan Palace. You laugh viciously while reminding me that no one cares about me.

That I had already killed the only person willing to die for me with my own hands.

But was that me?!

No, no, it wasn't me, it was you, Taxian-jun! It was you, Mo Weiyu!!

I'm not you, I'm not you...

There's no blood on my hands, I——

I can start over.

The other half of the soul was shrieking as well, a sharp-fanged mouth wide open on a twisted face:

Weren't you feeling guilty?

Didn't you fuck it all up?

Then why don't you go die?! Why don't you pay recompense to all those people you hurt in the past life for no gods damned reason with your own blood?!

You beast! You pretender!

How are you any different from me? You are Mo Weiyu, just the same as me! You bear all the memories of the past and all the sins of the past, you'll never be free of me—I'm your nightmare, your inner demon; I'm that abominable soul of yours that will one day be judged by the heavens!

Start over?

Why the hell should you get to? The nerve of you, what right do you have to start over? You're just tricking everyone, you're even tricking the people who love you.

All the good you're doing is just to ease that tiny, pathetic bit of guilty conscience in your heart, isn't it! Hah! Mo Weiyu! Do you dare to let them know just what kind of person you were in your past life?

Do you dare to let Chu Wanning know that, in the last lifetime, it was *you* who cut into his neck and bled him out, made his life a living nightmare! That it was *you* who blighted the world, made it into a hell on earth overrun with famines and disasters one after another!

It was *you*.

Hahahaha, you fucking beast, we are one and the same! There's no way out of this one, because I *am* you, Mo Weiyu! You know it to be true!

Backed into a corner and going out of his mind, Mo Ran felt around the bedside for the flint and steel again, tried to light up the candle to drive back the grisly darkness of night.

But even the candle rejected him, even the candle didn't care to save him.

He was abandoned in the darkness, hands shaking uncontrollably as he tried over and over to strike the flint and steel, over and over again, but there was no spark, there was no spark.

He finally collapsed onto the bed and burst into loud sobs. He apologized over and over again—in the darkness of night, there seemed to be a crowd gathered around his bed, each and every shadowy, wavering figure cursing at him, demanding his life in vengeance, howling at him that he was once evil and would always be evil. Mo Ran didn't know what to do; helplessly, he muttered again and again, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." but no one paid him any mind.

No one wanted to forgive him.

His head was scalding hot, and his heart felt like it was on fire.

Suddenly, he seemed to hear a soft sigh.

Opening his eyes, he saw Chu Wanning amidst the phantom shadows, looking just as he had—white robes draping loosely to the floor, wide, sweeping sleeves, features elegant and defined.

He walked over and came to a stop before the bed.

Mo Ran choked out between sobs, "Shizun...is it that I...have no right to see you again..."

Chu Wanning said nothing, only picked up the flint and steel, and calmly lit up the candle that Mo Ran never managed to.

Where there was Shizun, there was light.

Where there was Chu Wanning, there was a flame.

He looked up evenly at Mo Ran from where he stood by the candle holder with his long eyelashes downcast, and gave him a small, serene smile.

He said, "Go back to sleep, Mo Ran. See, the light is lit now. Don't be afraid."

Mo Ran's heart felt like it had been brutally crushed by something heavy, and his head hurt so bad it felt like it might split open; these words sounded so familiar, as if he had heard them before.

But he couldn't remember.

Chu Wanning brushed his sleeves aside and sat down at his bedside. The rain outside was bitterly cold, but it was warm inside the room, and the night was no longer dark.

Chu Wanning said, "I'll stay with you."

His heart ached at these words, clenched and tried to twist itself into a knot.

"Shizun, don't leave." He clutched at Chu Wanning's hand under his broad sleeve.

"I won't."

"It'll be dark again if you leave."

Mo Ran was crying. Feeling embarrassed, he lifted his other hand and covered his eyes. "Please don't leave me behind... I'm begging you... I really... I really don't want to be the emperor anymore, Shizun... please don't throw me away..."

"Mo Ran..."

"Please." Maybe it was the fever making him feel all faint and dazed, or maybe it was because some part of him knew that this was only a dream, that Chu Wanning wouldn't be here when he wakes up; he muttered over and over again, "Please don't throw me away."

That night, the icy raindrops outside pelted against the window like countless vengeful ghosts come knocking, trying to get inside and claim his life in retribution.

But inside Mo Ran's dream, Chu Wanning lit up the light, and that small, faint light drove away the ceaseless chill. Chu Wanning said, "Alright, I won't leave."

"You won't leave?"

"I won't leave."

Mo Ran opened his mouth, wanting to say thanks, but the only sound that came out was a whimper, the kind of pitiful sound a dog makes when gingerly trying to suck up to someone.

"That's what you all say, that you won't leave, won't abandon me." On the verge of drifting off, Mo Ran muttered dazedly with heavy-lidded eyes. "But then you all end up leaving anyway. No one wants me, I've been a stray dog for half my life... every time someone takes me in, they'll just throw me away again in a few days time... I'm so tired... really... Shizun... I'm really so tired, I can't do it anymore, can't keep going anymore..."

Just like a starving stray dog with no home to go back to, with mangled paws and a grimey coat of fur, with no choice but to fight over food with beggars and feral cats just to survive.

There was no trust left after so long being abused; if someone were to crouch down nearby, a domestic dog might expect to be fed food, but a stray dog would only expect to be hit with rocks. Anxious and on edge, he kept walking, walking, snarling at anyone and everyone—this was his fate.

"Shizun, if someday, you don't want me anymore, then please just kill me, don't throw me away."

He muttered quietly between sobs.

"It really hurts too much to be thrown away again and again, I'd rather die..."

The fever burned so high that it turned him into a muddled mess.

Until he couldn't even tell where he was, and even forgot whom the person in his dream had been.

"Mom." The last thing he muttered before passing out was, "it's getting dark, I'm scared... I want to go home..."

Author's Notes:

The title is taken from Du Fu's "An old friend visits my dreams, for he knows I think of him often. Now that you are ensnared, how can you sprout wings and wander freely?"^[8]

To avoid misunderstandings, I'm specially stating the source here.

Ch.124 Shizun Awakens

The barrier around Red Lotus Pavilion glowed and shimmered, day and night, through the seasons. Those inside remained inside, and those outside were kept out.

Five years passed in a blink, the world turning like a carousel lantern^[9], changing every day, changing every moon.

In teahouses, in history books... those years became pieces of stories told, lines written.

Looking back on the past——

The first year of Chu Wanning's seclusion, his disciple Mo Ran went down the mountain, while Xue Meng and Shi Mei stayed at Sisheng Peak, each cultivating on their own.

That year, Mo Ran's handwriting got a little better, Xue Meng broke through to the ninth level of Quiescence Blade, and Shi Mei went to study at the medicine sect Guyue'ye at the end of the year, learning much.

During that time, Mo Ran paid a visit to the salt merchant Chang family at Yizhou, asking to see Chang-gongzi for personal matters, only to find out that Chang-gongzi had suddenly passed away only a few days ago. After finding out in the Underworld that Chang-gongzi had been in cahoots with the fake Gouchen, Mo Ran had hoped to pry some information out of him, but his quarry was ahead of him and had already done away with the witness—even the body had been burnt into ashes.

A dead end.

The second year of Chu Wanning's seclusion, the cultivation world held the Spiritual Mountain Competition, in which Xue Meng won first place, Mei Hanxue second place, and Nangong Si third. Shi Mei tended to the sick and injured across the lower cultivation realm, while Mo Ran traveled the land, killing evil fiends and doing good deeds everywhere he went, before retreating into the mountains to cultivate, disappearing without a trace.

The third year of Chu Wanning's seclusion fell on a ghost year, teeming with Yin energy. The barrier where that bloody battle at Butterfly Town had taken place in the past weakened, ghosts and fiends encroaching into the living world, terrorizing the people. The disciples of Sisheng Peak, led by Xue Meng, fought to suppress the menace. Although the situation was not as dire as it had been that time when evil ghosts had swarmed the skies, it was still a disastrous year of misery and destitution.

The upper cultivation realm, being large and populous, opted for self-protection. Each of its nine major sects dispatched hundreds of disciples to guard the border between the upper and lower cultivation realms, and built an evil-repelling wall, preventing both fiends and refugees from moving toward the east.

All of the impoverished fugitives from the lower cultivation realms were refused entry at the wall and left with nowhere to go, the border defense keeping out ghosts and people alike. And so there was peace and calm within the walls, while corpses littered the ground just outside. Xue Zhengyong tried many times to negotiate with the upper cultivation realm, but to no avail. All of the blood spilt by the disciples of Sisheng Peak at Butterfly Town that year flowed eastward.

At the end of the year, Mo Ran, who had been cultivating in seclusion in the mountains, received a letter from his uncle. Learning that there was trouble in the Shu region, he went back into the world.

The fourth year of Chu Wanning's seclusion.

Mo Ran and Xue Meng fought side by side, the two young masters of Sisheng Peak leading the battle in the lower cultivation realm, driving the demonic fiends from the land. During the final battle, once again at Butterfly Town, Xue Ziming annihilated ghosts and demons by the hundreds and

thousands, while Mo Weiyu repaired the Heavenly Rift, single-handedly sealing the evil.

Afterwards, the upper cultivation realm removed the border defense and allowed the people of the lower cultivation realm to enter.

Xue Meng and Mo Ran became famous the world over, the former being the Son of the Phoenix whose prestige was matched by none, the latter becoming known as “Mo-zongshi” for repairing the Heavenly Rift with barrier techniques that were just like Chu Wanning’s.

And so time flowed, all things ever-changing.

Though Xue Meng had made a name for himself at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, he did not let it get to his head and neither did he grow complacent like he would have had in his youth. Instead, he diligently went to the bamboo forest to cultivate and train every chance he could, be it winter or summer, or even when sick.

He remembered Shizun’s words, that even without a holy weapon, the darling of the heavens was still the darling of the heavens. It was just that his inborn advantages were no longer sufficient to place him ahead of the curve, and he now had to work harder to make up for a disadvantage instead.

Sometimes, after completing a set of blade techniques, when he landed lithely on the ground and turned his head, he almost seemed to catch a glimpse of a small figure, sitting on the rock in the sunlight streaming through the bamboo, whistling with a leaf.

And then he couldn’t help thinking back to that day, when the Chu Wanning who had turned tiny had watched him practice his blade in the forest and guided his rhythm with a whistled tune.

Xue Meng could almost hear the melody as he reminisced with his head still turned.

So he closed his eyes, stilling his breath and concentrating, before opening them again just as a piece of withered bamboo leaf came drifting down. Longcheng thrummed as a flash of the blade reflected in his eyes, the shadow of the blade extending and retracting with intent, swift in the strike like the surging of tide and the flashing of lightning, deliberate in the withdrawal like the flurrying of snow in the endless sky.

By the time Longcheng was withdrawn and he stood straight once more, that piece of withered leaf had already been sliced into a million little pieces, drifting down to land silently by his feet.

With his head lowered, he almost seemed to still be that foolhardy young boy.

But when he looked up, those straight brows and clear, steady eyes were like the meeting of river and sea, the rapid stream surging into the vast openness, melding into unbound tranquility.

It had been five years.

Xue Meng raised his blade and wiped the frosty edge off with a piece of white cloth. He was just about to return the blade to its scabbard when he was interrupted by hurried footsteps from the distance, followed by a disciple rushing in, hollering non-stop, “Young Master! Young Master!”

“What is it?” Xue Meng frowned. “Where’s your composure? Pull yourself together. What happened?”

“The Red Lotus Pavilion——” The disciple was all red in the face and could hardly even catch his breath from how fast he’d run. “Ma, Master Huaizui left! Yu, Yuheng Elder——wo, woke up!!!!”

With a *clang*, Longcheng, the veteran of a hundred battles, fell to the ground from its owner’s hand.

Xue Meng’s handsome, fair-skinned face blanched of all color then turned bright red in quick succession, his mouth opening and closing mutely before he dashed off toward the southern summit of Sisheng Peak at a breakneck speed, leaving even his own weapon behind, forgotten on the ground. He nearly tripped over a rock on the way, stumbling and staggering.

“SHIZUN!!! SHIZUN!!!!!!”

Despite having just lectured someone else about composure, Xue Ziming sure wasted no time in flinging his own to the ground.

He got to the Red Lotus Pavilion just as Xue Zhengyong strode out. Grinning broadly, Xue Zhengyong stopped his son from charging in like his life depended on it, before he even got to set a foot inside.

Xue Meng was beside himself. “Dad!”

“Alrighty alrighty, I know you want to see Yuheng,” Xue Zhengyong said with a smile. “But he’s tired from having just recovered, and only talked with me a little before going back to sleep. Surely you wouldn’t wanna interrupt your shizun’s rest?”

Xue Meng faltered. “I mean, yeah, but...” But it had really been so hard waiting out the five years, and there was so much he wanted to tell Shizun; he wanted so badly to run over *right now* to tell Shizun about how he had won first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, about all the ghosts and demons he had put down, about his...

“Be sensible now.”

“.....” The phrase “be sensible” was Xue Meng’s weak point, always effective in making him listen. He let out a long sigh and stopped trying to shuffle past, though he stuck his neck out like that would let him peek past his bulky father and the slightly-ajar door to see the person on the bed.

Xue Meng pressed his lips together, still not quite giving up. “Can I just, just go in and take a quick look at Shizun, I won’t say anything.”

“With the way that you are, making a ruckus and a half whenever you’re happy?” Xue Zhengyong shot him a glare. “Don’t think I forgot how you won at the Spiritual Mountain Competition and acted all cool in front of outsiders, but hollered about it for four, five days straight as soon as you got back home, wouldn’t stop telling anyone and everyone about how you kicked Nangong Si off his wolf, told it so much that even Auntie Li at Mengpo Hall can recite your story, word for word. You? Not say a thing? Hah!”

“.....Fine.”

Xue Meng drooped.

“Father is right.”

“Well of course, when has your dad ever been wrong before.”

Xue Meng made a sour face, but he still couldn’t help but want to know. “Dad, how’s Shizun doing?”

“Pretty good, Master Huaizui even got rid of the remaining poison from the Heartpluck Willow.”

“Ah, so Shizun won’t turn into little shidi anymore?”

“Haha, nope.”

Xue Meng scratched his head, a little disappointed that he wouldn’t get to see Xia Sini anymore.

“Then, then what about everything else? Is he feeling okay?”

“Don’t worry, he’s fine. The only thing not fine was the look on his face when he found out that he’d been asleep for five years.” Xue Zhengyong couldn’t help chuckling as he recalled Chu Wanning’s expression. “Good thing he’s still tired, else he’d be grilling me right now. Oh yeah, speaking of——”

Suddenly thinking of something, he said to Xue Meng, “Meng-er, do me a favor. Your shizun missed quite a bit, being gone from the world for so long; it’ll be too much talking for us to try to catch him up on things ourselves, and tiring for him to listen to it all too. How about this, go ask your mom for some money then go take a trip down the mountain to buy some books from Wuchang Town. Don’t they have those chronicle-type books, the ones where they write down everything big and small? Get him a couple to read.”

Xue Meng could practically smell the ulterior motive—his old fox of a dad just thought he was being noisy, and was trying to kick him off the mountain to run errands.

But then again, the errands were for Shizun, so it was... not unacceptable. Shizun was asleep right now anyway, and it was true that he wasn’t too sure if he’d be able to keep his emotions under control if he were to go in the room right now, so there was a chance he’d end up running over and waking him up.

So he sighed and mumbled reluctantly, “Fine, I’ll go get the stinkin’ books.”

“Get a couple different ones, for both the upper and lower cultivation realms, Yuheng likes to read anyway.”

“Okay, alright.” And so Xue Meng lumbered dejectedly down the mountain by himself.

Xue Meng wasn’t much of a reader; he made it to the book-selling stand at Wuchang Town and looked this way and that, but couldn’t really tell much of anything from just the titles, so he squatted down to ask the vendor, “Uncle^[10], do you have any books about the recent happenings of the cultivation world in the last few years? Can you get me a couple?”

The vendor, who was quite excited to see someone from Sisheng Peak, even if he didn’t recognize that it was the Son of the Phoenix Xue Ziming himself, said with great enthusiasm, “Books about recent happenings? Of course of course. I’ve got both historical chronicles and fictional adaptations, all kinds of biographies and annals, regional chronicles, demon suppression records, even manuscripts from ten of the most famous storytellers out there. Which would xianjun like?”

All the babbling gave Xue Meng a headache, so he waved his hand and said, “Just, just gimme all of it, money’s no issue.”

A businessman’s favorite phrases to hear are not “I love you”, “I care about you”, or “I want you”, but “buy”, “money’s no issue”, and “one of each”.

The vendor immediately grinned from ear to ear, rubbing his hands together as he answered to Xue Meng’s order and turned to gather the books from the

rack. Having nothing better to do, Xue Meng went to flip casually through the books on the stand, and happened across a thin little booklet that seemed rather interesting—the page he'd flipped open read:

Cultivation World Wealth Ranking

First Place: Jiang Xi. Position: Rainbell Isle Guyue'ye Sect Leader

Second Place: Nangong Liu. Position: Linyi Rufeng Sect Leader

Third Place: Ma Yun Position: Westlake Taobao^[11] Estate Master

.....

So on and so forth, the entire page covered in tiny writing.

Xue Meng got fired up immediately, eager to find out his own rank, so he looked up and down the page four, five times, until his eyes started to cross, but he still couldn't find the name "Xue Meng".

Crestfallen at first and then a little mad, but all in all unresigned, he flipped the page to keep looking, but saw only a couple more names and the following line:

"Due to time and resource constraints, rankings only go to one hundred, and those after one hundred will not be listed."

Xue Meng slammed the booklet to the ground in a fit of rage. "Am I that fucking broke????"

The vendor jumped, startled, and then, seeing the book he had been reading, hurriedly comforted him while picking it up, saying, "Ease your anger, xianjun, these ranking booklets are just willy-nilly made up by folks, and on top of that, each region has its own version circulating. For example, if you buy one from Linyi, number one on the gentleman ranking is definitely gonna be Nangong-zhangmen. It's just something people flip through to pass the time, don't be mad, don't be mad."

His words seemed reasonable enough, and Xue Meng was pretty curious about the remainder of the booklet's contents, so he hmph'd, took it back from the vendor's hands, and offhandedly flipped two more pages.

This time, he saw an even more peculiar ranking.

"Young Master Ego Ranking"

Author's Notes:

Ma Yun, who's on the Wealth Ranking, as well as Taobao Estate are Easter eggs, hahaha~

Since Shizun is awake, we'll resume the daily mini-theatres as well~

The reopened mini-theatre~

A hawker's favourite phrase to hear is "Buy buy buy", so what's the phrase each character wishes to hear the most~

Chu Wan Ning wishes to hear: Elder Yuheng is a good shizun.

Mo Ran 2.0 wishes to hear: You are different from your past life.

Mo Ran 1.0 wishes to hear: Everyone likes you.

Mo Ran 0.5 wishes to hear: Stop dreaming and wake up, dog, your saliva's dripping onto the desk!

Xue Meng wishes to hear: Young Master is No.1, Young Master is the most handsome, Shizun finds Young Master the most lovable!

Shi Mei wishes to hear: Shi Mei is so gentle and cute, how can he be the BOSS?

Ye Wangxi wishes to hear: Nangong-gongzi will not be short-lived.

Nangong Si wishes to hear: Your dad has stepped down and let you take his place, gongzi, you can make your own decisions on matters.

Song Qitong wishes to hear: This is a heterosexual romance novel.

Mei Hanxue wishes to hear: Mei Hanxue, get ready to make your appearance.

Ch.125 Shizun Doesn't Need to Find a Cultivation Partner

Written in a neat and straight script, the ranking boldly declared:

First Place: Nangong Si
Position: Young Master of Rufeng Sect

Second Place: Xue Meng
Position: Young Master of Sisheng Peak

Xue Meng: “.....”

He slammed the booklet shut, every muscle in his face twitching, as if just barely holding back the urge to let loose and set the book ablaze.

“I see how it is,” Xue Meng spat from between clenched teeth, expression dark as he tapped the panic-stricken vendor with the booklet.

“Wrap this book separately, I’ll have to *look it over* when I get back.”

Shoving the copy of “God-Knows-What Rankings” roughly into his sleeve, Xue Meng carried the huge stack of books and scrolls picked out by the vendor and wobbled his way back up the mountain.

He was *mad*.

So mad he might die from it.

Second place on the Young Master Ego Ranking?

Bullshit! Which blind-ass dimwit wrote that! If he were to ever find out, he’d definitely have to give the guy a good pummeling to vent this rage—a hundred punches, maybe more! Ego my ass! What dogshit!

The rage tamped down the overwhelming joy somewhat, such that Xue Meng’s state of mind was more normal by the time he got back to the Red Lotus Pavilion, no longer so easily explosive. He was still very excited of course, but the bout of anger just now had more or less cleared up his head.

There was a pair of high-level disciples standing guard outside the pavilion, keeping people out to let the elder rest.

But Xue Meng was the young master, who would dare block his way?

And so Xue Meng walked in unimpeded.

Night had already fallen, and a honey-soft light glowed through the half-open windows of the pavilion’s main hall. Not knowing if Shizun was awake or not, Xue Meng softened his steps as he pushed the door open and went in with the stack of books in his arms.

It was so quiet that he could hear his own heartbeat, sounding like a bird bouncing at the tip of a branch.

Holding his breath and temporarily tossing “God-Knows-What Rankings” to the back of his mind, he looked toward the bed.

“.....”

There was a long silence as Xue Meng stared blankly.

“Eh?”

There was no one on the bed?

He was just about to go closer for a better look when he suddenly felt an ice-cold hand on his shoulder.

Followed by an eerie, chilly voice from behind him. “What intentions do you have in trespassing on the Red Lotus Pavilion?”

“.....” Stiffly, Xue Meng turned his head around, neck practically creaking, to see a deadly pale face in the dim lighting. He was so frightened that he screeched “WAH——” and reflexively raised an arm to cleave down toward the other before his brain even had a chance to process what he had seen.

But the other person was even faster than him, moving with lightning speed to land a strike at Xue Meng’s neck and a solid kick to the guts before forcing him down to his knees and holding him there, sending the books he had been holding scattering all over the floor in a mess.

Xue Meng was only a bit startled at first, but getting forced to the floor like this left him absolutely shocked!

After five years of diligent training, he was no longer the boy he used to be, so much so that even Nangong Si was no match for him. But this person, whose face he hadn’t even seen clearly, had so easily dispatched him in only two moves, leaving him no room to even counter—who could it be?

There was a ringing in his ears as all the blood in his body rushed to his head.

But just then, that person spoke in an icy tone, “I went into seclusion for five years and now all of a sudden everyone just feels free to come into my residence. Whose disciple are you and where is your master? Didn’t he teach you any rules?”

He had barely finished speaking when Xue Meng flipped around and threw himself at him in the tightest hug.

“Shizun! SHIZUN!!!”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Xue Meng lifted his head. He wanted to hold back, but tears fell despite his best efforts as he choked out between sobs, “Shizun, it’s me... look... it’s me...”

It turned out that Chu Wanning had only just woken up and had gone out for a bath, and that was why his touch was cold and a little damp. He remained standing in the same spot, and though the light was dim, it was enough to see by now that he had calmed down.

The person kneeling before himself was a young man of around twenty.

He had fair skin and thick, dark brows that were lower and closer to the eyes than most people’s, making him look pensive and compassionate. As for the lips, they were full and pouty, and quite nicely shaped. A face like that would look spoiled even when angry—truth be told, it was all too easy for people with such looks to be called “coquettish”, but not him.

Because the eyes were the most expressive part of the face, and Xue Meng’s eyes were like a strong liquor, spicy, fiery, and unfettered in the light,

giving off a domineering air.

The twin pools of liquor were unmistakable, even held within a pot of fine white jade.

It had been five years, after all. Xue Meng had been only sixteen when Chu Wanning had died; he was twenty one now.

Adolescent boys grow the fastest around sixteen to seventeen, a new look every year, a different build every half year. Suddenly seeing him again after having missed five years, Chu Wanning hadn't even recognized him at first.

".....Xue Meng."

Chu Wanning said slowly, after staring at him for a good while.

Like he was calling his name, but also like he was telling himself—

That this was Xue Meng, who was no longer that half-grown youth in his memories; he had grown up, with wide shoulders, and a height that was...

Chu Wanning pulled him up with a face that betrayed nothing.

"What are you kneeling for? Get up."

"....."

And a height that was not much different from his own.

The passage of time was the most visible on the young, carving a child into maturity in a mere few strokes. The first person Chu Wanning had seen when he'd first woken up had been Xue Zhengyong, so it hadn't quite hit him then just how long five years was, but seeing Xue Meng now, he was struck with the sudden realization that it had been a long time, that many people and things had changed in that time.

"Shizun, at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, I..." Having finally managed to calm down a little, Xue Meng began to talk of this and that, clutching at Chu Wanning the whole time. "I got first place."

Chu Wanning glanced at him, then a small smile tugged at his lips. "That's a matter of course."

Xue Meng continued, red-faced, "I, I fought Nangong Si, he, he had a holy weapon, I didn't, I..." Feeling a little embarrassed about boasting so openly, he lowered his head and bashfully rubbed at the hem of his clothing.

"I didn't embarrass Shizun."

Chu Wanning nodded with a small smile, then suddenly said, "It must've been bitterly difficult."

"Not bitter!" Xue Meng paused, and then said, "It was sweet."^[12]

Chu Wanning reached out, wanting to pat Xue Meng's head like he used to, but then, remembering that Xue Meng wasn't a child anymore and thinking that it might not be the most appropriate gesture now, his hand went off-course midway and ended up patting him on the shoulder instead.

The two of them picked up the books scattered across the floor from earlier and put them on the table.

"You bought so many," Chu Wanning mused. "How am I supposed to read it all?"

"It's not that many, Shizun can read ten lines at a time, it'll only take a night."

"....."

Xue Meng's admiration had not waned in the slightest, even after so long, but it was Chu Wanning who found himself somewhat at a loss for words. Not knowing what to say, he lit up the candle and flipped lightly through a couple of the books.

“Jiangdong Hall has a new sect leader now?”

“Yup, the new sect leader is a woman, and rumor says she has quite the temper.”

Chu Wanning kept reading. The page he was on was a long-winded record about Jiangdong Hall, which he read with rapt attention, but as he got to the section titled “Biography of Jiangdong Hall’s New Sect Leader”, he suddenly asked, as if entirely casually, “How has... Mo Ran been, these last couple of years?”

He had made sure to ask in a very mild, carefully controlled tone.

So Xue Meng didn’t think much of the sudden question, and just replied, “He’s alright.”

Looking up, Chu Wanning asked, “What’s alright supposed to mean?”

Xue Meng thought about how to say it for a moment. “Means he’s more or less a decent person now.”

“Was he not a decent person before?”

But then he nodded to himself before Xue Meng could even open his mouth to reply.

“Indeed not. Continue.”

“.....” Xue Meng’s specialty lay in describing his own deeds in lengthy, dramatic narratives while talking about other people’s deeds in a simple and brisk manner—especially if that other person happened to be Mo Ran.

“He’s been running around everywhere these years. Grew up some,” Xue Meng said. “That’s about it.”

“He didn’t attend the Spiritual Mountain Competition?”

“Nope, he was cultivating at Snow Valley then.”

Chu Wanning didn’t ask anything else.

The two of them chatted some more about this and that, and then, worried he might get tired, Xue Meng reined in all the other countless things he still wanted to say and excused himself.

After he left, Chu Wanning lay down in bed, still dressed.

He still remembered everything that had happened in the Underworld, so he wasn’t at all surprised about the way Mo Ran had changed. It was just that time waited for no one; during the past several years that he’d missed, even Xue Meng had grown up so much that he almost didn’t recognize him, so he wondered what Mo Ran looked like now.

He thought about what Xue Zhengyong had said to him earlier, before leaving: “Yuheng, let’s have a banquet tomorrow at Mengpo Hall to celebrate your coming out of seclusion. No refusing now, I’ve already sent a letter to Ran-er, surely you wouldn’t want him to rush back all this way and not get to have a warm meal and good wine?”

And so Chu Wanning hadn’t refused. He didn’t like crowds, but Mo Ran had always been his weak spot.

Xue Zhengyong also told him that many villages at the foot of Baitou Mountain had been destroyed during the last Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, leaving most of the survivors either injured or crippled. Due to the severity of the damage, the villages were still in ruins even now, and the entire region of snowy plains looked like hell on earth.

And that that was where Mo Ran was these days, helping the villages rebuild.

He continued reading for a while under the candle light, but in the end couldn't resist the urge. Getting up and summoning a messenger haitang with a wave of his sleeve, he thought for a moment before speaking, "Sect Leader, if I may trouble you, please send Mo Ran another letter and tell him to not rush. It would be great if he could make it back in time, but it's also alright if not, I won't blame him. The weather's getting cold lately, and winters in the Baitou Mountain region have always been harsh, so tell him to take care of the villages first, no sloppy rushing allowed."

Only after setting the haitang adrift did Chu Wanning finally let out a sigh and lie back in bed, picking up the half-read copy of cultivation world annals to continue reading.

His reading speed wasn't quite as outrageous as Xue Meng said, to be able to read the whole pile of books in one night, but finishing a couple of them was no problem.

Melted wax pooled into the candle holder as the night grew deeper. Folding the book closed, Chu Wanning shut his eyes, a slight crease between his brows.

He had read through essentially everything that had happened in the cultivation world in the last five years. The contents of the records were rather uneventful at first, but once they got to the second Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, Mo Ran's name started cropping up in many and more passages.

Chu Wanning was lying on his side at first, propping up his cheek with one hand while flipping lazily through the pages with the other, but he couldn't help sitting up at this part, holding up the book and reading closely.

"The people of the lower cultivation realm migrated eastward, but were met with a guarded wall at the border and denied entry. This coincided with several days of overcast skies that allowed fiends to walk freely in the open. The common people died by the thousands in front of the wall, and blood flowed in rivers. September saw the food supply route cut off for seventeen days; murder and cannibalism abounded..."

Here was written the events of when ghosts and fiends had run rampant in the lower cultivation realm, and many of the common people had thought to seek refuge in the upper cultivation realm, only to be turned away at the border, and in the end, desperate and starving, resorted to killing and eating one another to survive.

That the horror and carnage then had been reduced to just a couple of lines on paper left a sour taste in Chu Wanning's mouth as he read.

"The defense was led by young masters Meng and Ran of Sisheng Peak. Xue Meng's reputation soared as thousands of fiends were exterminated under the blade Longcheng and many more were driven back. Mo Ran single-handedly repaired the Heavenly Rift, banishing demons back into the Underworld, with barrier arts that were astoundingly similar to those of his master, Chu Wanning."

Chu Wanning's eyes opened a touch wider; though he knew that the Heavenly Rift described here was not quite as severe as the one back then, he was still a little surprised. "He can repair a rift all by himself now?"

As he kept reading, there were more passages about Mo Ran deeds, vanquishing evil as he travelled the land.

"...The Hedong region was set upon by a monster, which Bitan Sect refused to deal with for reasons undisclosed. Hearing of this, Mo Ran travelled there and

found the Drought Demon of Yellow River, and after a three-day long battle, beheaded the demon and burned its head to eliminate the threat. However, the young master was gravely injured, having been stabbed through the abdomen and ribcage. He was fortunate to meet Jiang Xi, the sect leader of Guyue'ye..."

Even the tips of Chu Wanning's fingers were ice cold.

He was gravely injured, having been stabbed through the abdomen and ribcage.

Whose abdomen, whose ribcage? Mo Ran's?

He read it over four, five more times, refusing to believe his eyes despite never having misread anything before. On the sixth time, he even put his finger on the page to follow along as he read the words one by one.

Hearing of this, Mo Ran travelled there...a three-day long battle...

Chu Wanning could practically see the back of a black-robed figure, long boots stepping through the enormous waves of the Yellow River, one hand held behind his back, the other grasped around a brightly glowing holy weapon in the form of a willow vine.

Beheaded the demon and burned its head to eliminate the threat. However, the young master was gravely injured.

His hand on the page clenched into a fist, so tightly that the joints turned white.

He could see Mo Ran lash out with the vine amongst the thunderous waves, Jianguai snapping across the sky in a fiery arc, severing the drought demon's head clean off and sending blood flying everywhere, but at the very same instant, the drought demon's sharp claws also pierced right through Mo Ran's torso!

The giant beast that had lost its head swung for a moment before crashing to the ground with a deafening sound, its colossal body cutting off the very flow of the Yellow River itself. Mo Ran collapsed by the riverside as well, unable to stand any longer as blood spread on his robes...

Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes.

And did not open them for a long, long time. But the lightly quivering eyelashes grew damp.

In the end, all of the books, without exception, referred to Mo Ran as "Mo-zongshi".

Reading these words, Chu Wanning felt only an indescribable strangeness and unfamiliarity.

He couldn't reconcile the brightly smiling, somewhat lazy adolescent in his memories with such a term of address as "Mo-zongshi". When it came to Mo Ran, he'd missed so much; Chu Wanning suddenly wondered, if that person were to come back tomorrow, whether he'd still be able to recognize this disciple of his.

A disciple who carried many more scars, a disciple who had become Mo-zongshi.

He couldn't help feeling vaguely uneasy at the thought.

He really wanted to see Mo Ran, but also didn't quite have the courage to.

Troubled by such anxiety, it wasn't until the latter half of the night that Chu Wanning finally dozed off.

Even after already having died once, he still didn't know how to take care of himself, lying there in a pile of books with no blanket. He really was a bit fatigued due to not being quite recovered yet. Add on top of that the fact that barely anyone dared to enter the Red Lotus Pavilion without permission, and no one would come to wake him up. And so Chu Wanning ended up sleeping the whole day away. By the time he woke up, it was already evening the next day.

Opening the window to see a setting sun, Chu Wanning fell into a prolonged silence.

“.....”

The surface of the lake reflected the dusk-red clouds as a crane flew leisurely across the horizon, returning to nest at the end of a long day.

It was already evening...

Had he slept through the night and then the entire day too?

Chu Wanning's entire face was ashen. A *crack* came from where his hand rested on the window frame, where he nearly snapped the wooden beam in half.

How absolutely unacceptable; the banquet that the sect leader was holding just for him was about to start, yet here he was, still drowsy-eyed, clothing in disarray and hair undone... what to do? What to do, what to do, what to do?!

He fretted anxiously to himself.

“Yuheng!” It was just his luck that Xue Zhengyong would choose this exact moment to come up here and invite himself in, only to freeze at the sight of Chu Wanning sitting on the bed with an indecipherable expression on his face.

“Are you still not up yet?”

“I'm up,” Chu Wanning replied, and he would've pulled off a dignified look too, if not for that strand of hair sticking up at his temple. “Did Sect Leader need something, to personally come all this way?”

“Oh no, I'm good, was just a bit worried cause I didn't see you come down from here all day.” Xue Zhengyong rubbed his hands. “Well, since you're up, go get washed and dressed then come over to Mengpo Hall for dinner later. Before leaving, Master Huaizui said to hold off on food for twenty four hours; you haven't eaten anything since you woke up yesterday, and it's now been twenty four hours, perfect timing. I had them make a bunch of your favorite dishes, like stewed crab meatballs, sweet osmanthus lotus root, and all that. C'mon, let's walk over together.”

“Your trouble is much appreciated.” Hearing that there would be stewed crab meatballs and sweet osmanthus lotus root, Chu Wanning no longer cared to waste time getting ready, planning instead to just throw on a change of clothes and immediately go down the mountain with Xue Zhengyong.

After all, stewed crab meatballs had to be eaten while still hot, since they got all bland once they cooled.

“No trouble, no trouble.” Xue Zhengyong rubbed his hands some more while watching him put on his shoes, and then, suddenly remembering something, said, “Oh yeah, one more thing.”

Chu Wanning was no good at the mundane tasks of daily life to start with, and the five year slumber only made him even more out of it: he tried to put the left sock on the right foot for a good solid while before realizing it and swapping them around with a perfectly straight face that betrayed absolutely nothing.

Focused on putting on socks, he answered mildly without even lifting his head, “What is it?”

Xue Zhengyong said with a grin, "I got an urgent letter from Ran-er this morning, saying he'll definitely make it back tonight. And he got you a congratulatory gift too; he's really getting quite thoughtful the older he gets, I... hey, Yuheng, why are you taking off your socks?"

"No reason, they're yesterday's."

Chu Wanning said, "They're a little dirty, I'm changing to a fresh pair."

"...Then why didn't you do that earlier?"

"I only just remembered."

Xue Zhengyong was an open and forthright guy, so he didn't think too deeply about it, only looked around the place for a bit before commenting, "You know, Yuheng, you're not getting any younger. It's about time you got a cultivation partner if you ask me. Just look at your place, it was all neat and tidy when Master Huaizui left, but as soon as you woke up, haven't even really lived in the place yet, and there's already paper and clothes strewn about everywhere... I'll keep an eye out for you, how about it?"

"Sect Leader, kindly see yourself out."

"Eh?"

Chu Wanning's face was all doom and gloom. "I'm changing."

"Haha, sure, I'll get out, but, the cultivation partner thing...?"

Chu Wanning's head snapped up, eyes cold like a pair of frozen lakes as they glared at Xue Zhengyong, tactless man that he was.

Finally catching on somewhat, Xue Zhengyong chuckled awkwardly and said, "...Just asking. I was wondering what kind of things you look for, since I'm sure you won't settle for just anyone."

Chu Wanning dropped his eyelids, but seemed to have shot Xue Zhengyong a glare.

Xue Zhengyong sighed and said helplessly, "What, am I wrong? I know you're picky."

Chu Wanning replied mildly, "I just have better things to do, is all, how is that being picky."

"Alright then, if you're not picky, then tell me what kinda looks you like? No pressure or anything, just so I can keep an eye out for you."

Annoyed and not wanting to waste his breath, Chu Wanning offhandedly made something up, "Alive. Female. Sect Leader can feel free to keep an eye out. Kindly see yourself out."

He pushed Xue Zhengyong toward the door as he spoke, but Xue Zhengyong wasn't about to just give up, especially after the whole dying thing—he was really, truly, wholeheartedly invested in getting Chu Wanning hitched.

Back when Chu Wanning had died, Xue Zhengyong greatly regretted that he didn't have a child to leave behind like his brother did, that way he'd at least have some way to remember him by, someone to look after and make amends to.

But Chu Wanning had neither children nor siblings, had always kept to himself.

Xue Zhengyong had been disconsolate then, had felt incredibly guilty, and, more than that, had felt that Chu Wanning was really too pitifully lonely.

“That tells me absolutely nothing... Yuheng, really, I’m being serious here —hey!”

Xue Zhengyong was shoved out and the door slammed in his face even as he struggled.

Followed by a barrier to make sure he stayed out.

Xue Zhengyong: “.....”

Author’s Notes:

New mini-theatre: “Lead Males’ and Side Males’ Standards For A Significant Other”

The Sect Leader handed down a little test-scroll, and required everyone to write their standards for a cultivation partner.

Chu Wan Ning: Why is it this again? It is already stated in the novel: female, alive. As long as these criteria are met.

Mo Ran: (sighs)...Actually, I don’t know what qualities I want my cultivation partners to have as well, but I feel that with my IQ, I’m not suited for dating.

Xue Meng (taking this seriously, thinking very hard): They can’t be below my chin in height, they can’t be heavier than me, and their waist can’t be thicker than my thigh. Best if they have almond-shaped eyes, I like almond-shaped eyes. They can’t lose to Shi Mei in terms of looks (Shi Mei:), can’t lose to Mo Ran in terms of martial ability (Mo Ran: Submit your scroll, there’s no such woman), they must be unsurpassed in loyalty and chastity, priority given to those who can cook. Most importantly: They must be able to eat spicy food, I can’t stand half-spicy, half-clear broth hotpot. Even though my family doesn’t have a throne for me to inherit, I feel that I’m not yet an old leftover man^[13]. I don’t care whether I get married or not; after all, a man’s career is more important, so as long as one of the criteria above is not fulfilled, you don’t have to approach me to talk, let’s not waste each other’s time.

Shi Mei: I’m fine as long as they’re kind. Whether they’re pretty or ugly isn’t very important.

Nangong Si: First, honest. Second, pretty.

Ye Wangxi: ...Not interested.

Mei Hanxue: Can I find one who can give me a bigger part? Director, do you need me as a body double for the bedroom scenes between those two male leads?

Big White Cat that has come online: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Dog that has gone offline: [thanking jjwxc readers]

Ch.126 Shizun, Wait One More Chapter For Me!

The end of Yuheng Elder’s seclusion was naturally a cause for celebration for the entire sect. But Xue Zhengyong knew that Chu Wanning disliked the bustle of gatherings and didn’t have much of a way with words, so he planned

out what to say and what to do for him ahead of time. Chu Wanning was worried that he might be a bit awkward at the banquet at first, but he soon found out that he really didn't have to worry at all.

Xue Zhengyong may be a big, burly man, but he was keenly perceptive and had a full grasp on the mood in the room. Before the gathering of all the elders and masses of disciples, he spoke some words from the bottom of his heart—not so many as to come off like a deliberate attempt to stir up emotion, but being genuinely moving instead. Only Lucun Elder couldn't read the air, laughing as he shouted:

"Yuheng, why the long face on this happy occasion? You should say a few words too, some of the newer disciples here don't even know what you look like."

Xue Zhengyong tried to save him. "Lucun, I've already said everything there is to say for Yuheng, don't put him on the spot."

"That's different, he's gotta put in at least a couple of words."

"But he——"

"It's fine." Xue Zhengyong was about to say something else when he was interrupted by a deep, cool voice. "Since there are new disciples here, I'll just say a few words," Chu Wanning stood up as he spoke. His eyes scanned Mengpo Hall, through the bustling crowd of a couple thousand people all looking at him.

But Mo Ran wasn't among them.

Chu Wanning thought for a moment, then said, "The Red Lotus Pavilion on the southern summit has myriad defensive mechanisms and mechanical guardians. In order to prevent accidental injuries, new disciples are advised against visiting without cause."

The crowd fell silent.

Lucun couldn't help asking, "...That's it?"

"That's it."

Chu Wanning responded, then dropped his gaze and swept his sleeves aside to sit back down.

The silence stretched on.

The new disciples were pensive: dying and then coming back to life after five years of seclusion from the world was definitely not something that most people would ever experience. Shouldn't you at least say something heartfelt about your feelings, or express some gratitude to your saviour, things like that?

But he just tossed out that one line like he was reading out the tenets or something and left it at that, where's the sincerity?

But the older disciples couldn't help laughing quietly, several of them whispering to each other, "That's Yuheng Elder, alright."

"Still doesn't like talking."

"Pfft, seriously. Bad temper and short fuse. He's got a good-looking face, but that's about it." Someone quipped under the cover of everyone else's chattering, from where they stood far enough away that Chu Wanning wouldn't hear. The crowd chuckled amongst themselves as they talked, then turned to look toward that white-robed person sitting next to Xue Zhengyong.

The banquet began. There were spicy and savory Sichuan dishes of course, but also lots of finely-made desserts and beautifully arranged, mild and sweet

Jiangnan dishes, covering entire tables in abundance.

Xue Zhengyong also opened a hundred-some jars of top quality pear blossom white wine to share between the tables, and cups were generously filled with the amber-colored wine. Chu Wanning was on his fourth stewed crab meatball when a large bowl was suddenly put down in front of him with a *clang*.

“Yuheng! Let’s have a cup!”

“...That’s a bowl.”

“Aiyah who cares if it’s a cup or a bowl, just drink it! It’s your favorite, pear blossom white!” Xue Zhengyong’s bold features were practically glowing with joy in the cheerful atmosphere. “I know how much you can drink! A thousand cups won’t even get you tipsy! C’mon, cheers!”

Chu Wanning smiled and picked up the big bowl, clinked it with Xue Zhengyong.

“Since Sect Leader says so, cheers.”

With that, he downed the bowl and flipped it over to show Xue Zhengyong. Xue Zhengyong was overjoyed, but the rims of his eyes turned a little red. “That’s my man! I remember, five years ago, when you asked me for a jar of the top quality pear blossom white from the cellar and I wouldn’t give it to you back then. I couldn’t regret it enough later on, thought I’d never... never get to...” He trailed off, then abruptly lifted his head and huffed out a long exhale before declaring loudly, “Nevermind! No point dwelling on it! If you want it, you can have the whole cellar of pear blossom white! I’ll make sure you have good wine to drink for the rest of your life!”

Chu Wanning said with a smile, “Deal.”

While they chatted, Xue Meng was over in a corner with someone, whispering back and forth for a good while before Xue Meng suddenly grabbed that person and came over with them in tow, both of them bowing together to Chu Wanning in proper, upright form.

“Shizun!” Xue Meng lifted his head, his youthful face handsome and commanding.

“Shizun.” The other person lifted his head as well to reveal a face that was beautiful like a lotus coming into bloom, like wisps of clouds drifting lightly between peaks—who else could it be but Shi Mei?

Shi Mei said bashfully, “This disciple was held up seeing patients at the free clinic in Wuchang Town today, and only just now came to visit Shizun. Pray forgive this disciple’s shameful tardiness.”

“...It’s no matter.”

Chu Wanning looked Shi Mei over carefully through lowered lashes, and though his expression remained neutral, he was caught off guard by a sudden sense of loss deep inside.

Mo Ran’s beloved person had grown up to be way too incomparably beautiful.

If the Shi Mei of five years ago was still a fledgeling beauty, then the grown up Shi Mei standing before him now was like a queen of the night^[14] in full bloom, its tender green sepals no longer able to hide the glistening white within, snowy petals quivering as they unfurl, its loveliness eclipsing everything else around it. He had a pair of sweet peach blossom eyes that were clear and dewy.

The curve of his nose was gentle and perfect; a little more would've seemed too harsh, and a little less would've look too weak. And his lips were red and full, like a dew-laden cherry, and every word spoken was sweet and soft.

"Shizun, this disciple missed you so much."

He rarely ever expressed his feelings so openly. Chu Wanning didn't know what to say for a moment, caught by surprise as he was.

Shi Mei's eyes were red-rimmed with emotion, and Chu Wanning couldn't help feeling a little ashamed of himself.

What was he being jealous of Shi Mingjing for? He was so much older than them, and their superior to boot, why should he be jealous of Shi Mingjing?

Thinking thus, Chu Wanning nodded and said mildly, "You can both get up."

His two disciples stood up by his leave.

.....

Chu Wanning had only just gotten his feelings under control, but then he glanced at Shi Mei and froze.

"....."

Shi Mei was taller than Xue Meng?

Chu Wanning choked a little, cleared his throat twice, and couldn't resist stealing a couple more glances.

Not just a little taller, either.

But Shi Mei's figure was even better like this, with broad shoulders, a slim waist, and long legs, looking gentle and demure but with a suggestion of subtle assertiveness, an air of grace and elegance that defies words. This grown up Shi Mei was nothing like the fragile-looking adolescent he used to be.

Chu Wanning's face fell again despite himself.

He felt like he had lost a little too pathetically.

But...forget it.

He had kept his feelings for Mo Ran to himself even until death, so there was no way he'd ever say it in the future. As for Mo Ran, that guy had chased him all the way to the Underworld and still couldn't tell that he liked him, so there was no way he'd ever notice in the future either.

The two of them can just be master and disciple for the rest of this life. That's a strong bond too, it's fine.

As for anything beyond that... no point forcing something that wasn't meant to be.

Xue Meng, red-faced, suddenly nudged Shi Mei with his elbow and shot him a meaningful look.

Helplessly, Shi Mei said in a soft voice, "You really want me to do it?"

"Yeah, it'd be better if you do it."

"But you're the one who got these things over the five years..."

"Yeah that's why it'd be awkward for me to! You do it. Besides, you brought back some stuff with you today, right?"

"...Alright." Shi Mei sighed and gave in, taking a huge rosewood box that Xue Meng had been hiding behind his back and holding it in both hands as he walked over to Chu Wanning, who had already sat back down to continue eating his stewed crab meatball.

“Shizun, the young master and I...prepared some gifts over the past five years, just some... small gestures, please accept them.”

As he spoke, Xue Meng’s face grew redder and redder behind him. In an attempt to cover up how flustered he was, he crossed his arms and turned his head away in feigned nonchalance, as if suddenly fascinated by the decoratively carved pillars of Mengpo Hall.

Generally speaking, opening a gift in front of the giver was impolite, but as their shizun, Chu Wanning didn’t want to accept anything too valuable, so he thought for a moment and then asked, “What is it?”

“It’s...just some little things we got here and there.” Smart and perceptive as he was, Shi Mei immediately figured out Chu Wanning’s concern and said, “Nothing expensive. Just take it back and open it for a look then if that’s what Shizun is worried about.”

But Chu Wanning countered, “There’s no difference between opening it now or when I get back. I’ll just go ahead and open it.”

“No no no!!!! Don’t open it!” Xue Meng froze for a second, then immediately rushed over in a panic and tried to grab the box.

But Chu Wanning had already opened it, and even threw him an impassive look.

“What are you running for, don’t trip and fall.”

Xue Meng: “.....”

Sure enough, the box was stuffed full with all kinds of interesting-looking little things, including a few delicately embroidered hair ribbons, finely crafted hair clasps, and intricate belt buckles made of jade. Chu Wanning casually picked up a bottle of sedatives, and saw on it the seal of Hanlin the Sage glistening under the candle light.

The contents of the box were quite costly indeed.

Chu Wanning really didn’t know what to say, opting instead to look up and shoot Xue Meng a glare. Xue Meng’s face grew even redder.

Xue Zhengyong watched on from the side, amused. He said, “Yuheng, just accept it as a token of Meng-er’s thoughtfulness. The other elders all got you fairly pricey gifts too anyway, what’s one more?”

Chu Wanning said, “Xue Meng is my disciple.”

The implication being that he didn’t want to accept this many things from his own disciple.

“But it’s just some things I picked up over the last five years that I thought would suit Shizun!” Hearing him say that, Xue Meng panicked. “And I only used money I earned myself, not a cent of dad’s money. Shizun, if you don’t take it, I... I...”

“He’ll be upset, won’t be able to sleep,” Xue Zhengyong filled in for his son, “might even go on a hunger strike.”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

He really didn’t know how to deal with this father-son pair, so he looked back down at the box, and noticed another, even smaller wooden box lying inside the pile of stuff.

“What’s this...” He took it out and opened it to reveal four little clay figurines.

Confused, he looked up at Xue Meng, only to see that Xue Meng’s face was currently the color of a ripe tomato. Seeing Chu Wanning look his way, Xue

Meng hurriedly lowered his head, the handsome young man acting like a bashful little boy under his shizun's stare, unable to make eye contact.

Chu Wanning asked, "What is this?"

Xue Zhengyong was curious as well. "Let's take it out and have a look."

"No...don't..." Hand on his forehead, Xue Meng mumbled helplessly. But his old man had already cheerfully taken out the four little clay dolls and arranged them in a row. The little figurines were crudely made, ugly and crooked, and all looked basically the same except for one being slightly taller and the other three being slightly shorter. Xue Meng's work, to be sure.

Xue Meng had originally wanted to learn the mechanical arts from Chu Wanning, but it only took a day before Chu Wanning had him switch to the blade instead, for no other reason than the fact that the boy had managed to make absolutely nothing after an entire afternoon spent at the Red Lotus Pavilion, but *had* nearly managed to tear down the machine room with just a file.

It must've been hard work to make these clay dolls with nothing but the power of his pure heart.

Xue Zhengyong grabbed one of the dolls and looked it over, turning it this way and that, but still couldn't figure it out. So he asked his son, "This thing that you made, what is it?"

Xue Meng said stubbornly, "N-nothing, I was just messing around."

"This black one is really ugly, that taller white one looks much better," Xue Zhengyong mumbled as he thumbed at the little clay doll's head.

Xue Meng yelled, "Don't touch it!!!!"

But it was too late. The little doll spoke.

"Hands off, Uncle."

Xue Zhengyong: "....."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Xue Meng gave himself a sound slap, then covered his eyes with his arms, not wanting to even look any longer.

It took Xue Zhengyong quite a while to put two and two together, laughing out loud when he finally figured it out, "Oho, Meng-er, is this supposed to be Ran-er? Didn't you make him a bit too ugly? Hahahahaha!"

Xue Meng shot back angrily, "That's cause he *is* ugly! Look at the Shizun I made instead! Pretty, right?!" His face was bright red as he spoke, pointing at the white-painted clay doll.

But the tip of his finger inadvertently brushed against the little white doll's head. It hmph'd coldly and said, "Don't be impudent."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!!" Xue Zhengyong laughed so hard he nearly cried. "That's pretty good, pretty good! You put a voice charm in them didn't you? The little one's actually doing a pretty good impression of Yuheng's tone, hahahaha!"

Chu Wanning said with a flick of his sleeves, "Ridiculous."

But then carefully picked up the four little clay dolls, tucked them back into the box, and put the box next to himself. His face betrayed nothing the entire time, looking calm as ever, but there was a hint of lingering gentleness in his eyes when he looked back up.

"I'll take this one, you can keep the rest. It's all things you can use too, and this master isn't wanting for any of them."

"But..."

“Young master, just do as Shizun says.” Shi Mei smiled and consoled him quietly, then lowered his voice to say, “What the young master wanted to give the most was the box of little clay dolls anyway, right?”

Xue Meng was so mad there was practically smoke rising from his head. He shot Shi Mei an angry glare, stomped his feet, then bit his lip and refused to talk any more.

Xue Meng had always been flattered and fawned upon while growing up, never had words he couldn't say or things he couldn't do, so if he liked something or disliked something, he'd always express it loudly and frankly.

Chu Wanning felt like he was extraordinary for that reason, because this kind of candor was something that he himself never had, and one of Xue Meng's most remarkable qualities. He envied that about him, that openness that was so unlike the way that he himself could never be honest, claiming to not care about something even as it occupied his thoughts.

He had gotten a little better about it since coming back to life, but it was what it was, and the changes weren't really too noticeable. It would take more than one cold day for a river to freeze three feet deep; he felt like he probably wouldn't really change all that much, even if he were to try for the rest of his life. And besides, he wouldn't really be him anymore if he changed too much.

The banquet was nearly over, but Mo Ran had still not come back.

Chu Wanning's chest felt all stuffy, but he said nothing about it, even though he really wanted to ask Xue Zhengyong what exactly Mo Ran had written in that letter from earlier today, wanted to ask if he knew where exactly Mo Ran was right now.

But instead he only gripped the wine cup and downed one drink after another, his joints white with the force of his grip. The wine burned all the way down, but it did not burn enough to warm his heart, not enough for him to summon the courage to turn around and ask when he would be back.

Author's Notes:

There are perks on Weibo today~

Thankieww “Xu Liang” for your picture of Shizuwun walking in the snow looking for plum blossoms~~ A very very handsome Shizuwun with his thick cloak, I can't help but want to bury my face into the fur of his hood hehe~ It's suwuper great I want to lick it~~ thanks~

Thankieww “Salted Fish in Flying Snow” for little cutie Xia Sini~ while we're on this topic, Xia Sini will not be coming online ever again, although he's Shizun's child form, I feel kind of sad for some reason QAQ Cradling osmanthus cake and asking Dog-gege for lotus flower crisp and stuff, is he really not afraid of repeating the Fourth Ghost King's mistakes hahaha thanks~

Thankieww “Shuanghua stabbing Meatbun” for Nangong Si...hahaha I really need to have a good laugh at this, mermaid Nangong Si hahahahaha, Ye Wangsi is probably laughing himself awake from this dream, he went again the ship dynamics hahaha. Is this cold and heartless mermaid Nangong-gege x passionate prince loyal dog Ye, hahaha~ but little koi Nangong-gege is really cute, I want to tease him~ thanks~

Mini-theatre “The Reason Behind The Team's Tardiness”

Chu Wan Ning: Late is late, I don't want to explain, just punish me.

Mo Ran 0.5: There was an old woman walking too slowly on the way here, and she got in my way. I came here right after killing her, arriving a little late.

Hand this venerable one a clean handkerchief, some blood splattered onto my face.

Mo Ran 1.0: Hahaha~ An old granny was crossing the road, the way she was leaning on her cane was sooo funny. I snatched the cane she was using to cross the road because I wanted to see something comedic happen. But I returned it to her afterwards, don't worry, don't worry~

Mo Ran 2.0: On the way here, I saw an elderly person who had difficulty walking, so I helped her cross the road and delayed my journey, my apologies.

Shi Mei: I ran into a patient kicking up a fuss so that he could attain some benefits he wasn't entitled to and really couldn't leave...sorry...

Xue Meng: None of your shitty business.

Nangong Si: The one above is really uncouth, I'll be more polite--what does that have to do with you?

Ye Wangxi: I am never late. Look again, it should be your hourglass that's malfunctioning.

Mei Hanxue: For every step I take, there'll be female cultivators coming up to pester me. Even if I leave the house four hours earlier, I'll still end up late. I've given up on fighting it.

Ch.127 Shizun, Careful, the Ground's Slippery

But Chu Wanning didn't ask, and Xue Zhengyong didn't bring it up.

In fact, the sect leader of Sisheng Peak was getting kind of plastered, feeling light-headed and slurring his words.

He suddenly leaned over, stared at Chu Wanning, and said, "Yuheng, you're upset."

"I am not."

"You're mad."

"I am not," Chu Wanning repeated.

"Who upset you?"

Chu Wanning: "....."
Should he ask?

He'd feel a lot better if he just asked. Maybe Mo Ran didn't actually say that he'd definitely be back tonight, maybe he only said that he'll try his best to make it back, and Xue Zhengyong just said it wrong, or remembered it wrong...

Chu Wanning glanced toward the door, at the darkness of night outside. The banquet was coming to a close, and the seats would soon be cold.

His first day out of seclusion, and Mo Ran hadn't made it back in time.

Every single disciple of Sisheng Peak was here, including the ones whose names he didn't know and the ones he'd never even met before. Only he wasn't here.

Without him here, the banquet was incomplete.

All the stewed crab meatballs, sweet osmanthus lotus root, and fragrant pear blossom white wine in the world wouldn't make it complete.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes, but there was suddenly a ruckus from the direction of Mengpo Hall's front entrance, with a bunch of disciples yelling excitedly in the distance.

"Aiyah——! Look! What's that outside?"

"There's something in the sky!"

More and more people gathered over there, and even those in the hall could hear the lively crackling sounds and thunderous booms coming from the outside, one after another.

They walked out to the verdant lawn just outside Mengpo Hall, looking up at the sky all lit up by fireworks, explosions of millions of little glittering specks blooming and scattering against the backdrop of the starry night sky.

"Fireworks!" The younger disciples beamed with joy, youthful faces illuminated by the flickering lights above, the sky full of stars reflected in their eyes.

"It's so pretty, I've never seen fireworks this big, not even at New Year's!"

Chu Wanning walked slowly out from the hall as well. He wasn't in the greatest mood; though he was grateful that Xue Zhengyong had gone to the trouble of preparing such a brilliant fireworks show, the heaviness in his chest continued to weigh on him.

Fweeee——

A sharp whistling sound pierced through the night sky.

He lifted his head listlessly to see a streak of golden-red light shoot into the open sky like an arrow loosened from its bow.

How beautiful.

If only that person were here too...

Bang!

That brilliant flare flew up to a height about level with the Big Dipper's handle before bursting in explosion to fill the night sky with countless shimmering sparkles, eclipsing all the stars of the Milky Way and stealing the light from the moon itself.

The fireworks scattered like so many petals of haitang blossoms set adrift by a passing breeze, floating and dancing like wintry snow, glimmering and rippling like open waters. Amidst the splendid display and lively bustling of the crowd, Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes.

"Disciple Mo Ran Welcomes Shizun Back From Seclusion."

Someone said from behind him all of a sudden, every word clear and needle-like.

Chu Wanning began to tremble lightly, feeling like there were thorns in his back, fire in his throat. With his heart beating all out of rhythm, blood racing through his veins, and unable to breathe, he whipped his head around——

Standing behind him were a couple of disciples who had just come out from Mengpo Hall, all of them looking up at the sky in amazement, and one of them had read aloud thus.

Gradually, it wasn't just the one person reading aloud anymore.

Everyone found it novel and interesting; everyone, including the youngest disciples, the men and the women, the ones standing alone and those in groups, all of them were looking up at the glittering, resplendent night sky and reading out loud:

*Disciple Mo Ran.
Welcomes Shizun Back From Seclusion.*

The utterances carried a tenderness like the tide, gentle as sleepy whispers; the words bore a determination like a boulderstone, firm as mighty mountains. Chu Wanning's head snapped skyward, where the brilliant fireworks, guided by spiritual energy, had spelled out the sentence in huge, shimmering letters across the night sky.

The fireworks flowed into a magnificent river that could probably be seen from even hundreds of miles away, and in that moment, in that night, the colorful, glimmering specks felt like they were converging in on him from across hills and mountains, across time and bygone, bringing with them that person's joys and sorrows, longings and regrets.

He suddenly felt like a piece of driftwood afloat in the ocean, and the ocean was Mo Ran's eyes, the way they had looked when he had suddenly pulled him into his arms in front of the ghost king's palace in the Underworld, full of warm tenderness, fiery passion, and unwavering determination.

There was nowhere to run.

He was surrounded by that person's murmurs, that person's laughter, that person's affection.

Chu Wanning didn't want to think about what kind of affection it was, that of a master and disciple, or something else.

Just having the affection was enough.

Mo Ran didn't manage to make it back before the end of the banquet.

Even pushing on through the night without stop, it was simply too far away.

Luckily he still had the signal fireworks made by Xuanji Elder in his bag that had been given to him for use in an emergency, should he meet with some mishap while away from the peak. It was an ingenious creation; by writing a message on paper with spiritual energy, putting it into the tube, and setting off the firework, the message would be writ boldly across the sky in letters so large that it would be visible from Sisheng Peak from however far away.

The signal fireworks were costly and exceedingly difficult to make, but Mo Ran didn't care about that; all he wanted was to make sure that his shizun wouldn't be upset.

Even from across mountains and rivers, even separated by time and circumstances.

He had to make sure that Chu Wanning could hear these words.

"Disciple Mo Ran Welcomes Shizun Back From Seclusion."

The banquet came to a close four hours later, and it was late at night by the time he got back to the Red Lotus Pavilion.

Chu Wanning smelled like wine. He wanted to take a bath, wash the smell off, but the weather had gotten cooler lately and the water in the pavilion's lotus pond was too cold for bathing in—he'd nearly caught a cold bathing there yesterday. He thought for a moment, then went inside to fetch a change of clothes and a wooden washbin, and headed toward Miaoyin Springs^[15].

Miaoyin Springs was the sect's communal bath. He'd only ever bathed there in his first few months here at Sisheng Peak.

This late at night, there would be hardly anyone bathing there. Lifting the thin layer of hemp curtain with one hand, Chu Wanning walked in. Many parts of

Sisheng Peak had been renovated, but Miaoyin Springs was the same as before, with tall, black-tiled walls on all sides, and sheer veils drifting lightly in the breeze along a winding corridor that led from the front gate to a set of six narrow wooden steps lacquered with a clear varnish.

The bathers would all take off their shoes and socks before going down these steps, so just one look here would reveal just how many people were currently soaking in the baths.

Chu Wanning took a look while taking off his shoes and socks, and saw that there was only one lone pair of boots here, of a fairly large size and a little dirty, but placed neatly in the corner, rather than carelessly tossed to the ground just because it was empty here.

Chu Wanning wondered whom it was, to come here for a bath this late at night...

But it was only a fleeting thought. Holding his small washbin, he walked down the steps barefooted, brushed aside the last set of curtains at the end of the footpath, and walked into the courtyard.

The courtyard was hazy with steam from the massive hot spring pond inside that rose and fell with the ground, the water cascading down in a broad, rumbling waterfall. The thick, cloudy steam unfurled gently outwards from the pond, drifting slowly into the air, spreading into every corner and crevice.

The thick steam made everything here blurry, and a person had to get very close to another to see their face.

Walking across the little footpath of smooth, colorful pebbles under the luxuriant canopy of flowering peach blossoms, Chu Wanning arrived at the nearest entrance to the baths. There was a low shelf carved from bluestone there specifically for holding clothes. He put his wooden washbin and robe on the shelf, then took off his clothes and walked slowly into the pond.

It was nice and warm.

He sighed softly in contentment despite himself.

If not for the fact that he didn't want to crowd in here with everyone else while bathing, nor did he fancy coming here late at night every day, he'd really rather bathe here than in the cold waters of the Red Lotus Pavilion's simple pond.

Xue Zhengyong really was fastidious and thorough. He had personally overseen the construction of Miaoyin Springs; flowers bloomed along the edge of the pond year-round, there was a waterfall at the end of the pond for rinsing off, and there was even a small wooden pavilion on the side to lie down and rest in after soaking, provided with heated stones to be placed along the meridians to help relieve the pressure.

Way more indulgent than that rushed bath he had to make do with yesterday at the Red Lotus Pavilion's pond.

Delighted and seeing as how there was no one else around, Chu Wanning let loose for a moment, spreading out his slender body and swimming all the way to the waterfall.

Splash!

He had only just risen out of the water and wiped his face, a faint smile still lingering at his lips, when he abruptly noticed a man very close to him, showering in the surging waterfall with his back to him. The waterfall was so loud that Chu Wanning couldn't hear the other person at all, even this close.

If he had come out of the water a little later, swam a little further, the tips of his fingers probably would've touched the man's legs.

Good thing he had gotten up when he did and hadn't ended up touching the other person, but this was still a bit inappropriately close—he was practically standing right behind the man. He was very tall, quite a bit taller than Chu Wanning, and his sun-kissed skin was the color of honey, making him seem wild and unrestrained. His shoulders were strong and broad, shoulder blades flexing beneath golden skin with concealed strength as his arms moved.

He wasn't overly muscular, but sculpted and evenly toned. The water cascaded over his body, rivulets of it flowing down the wide expanse of his strong, masculine back to gather into streams. Some of the water splashed off, but some seemed infatuated with this body of his, clinging to him in a light sheen, loathe to part.

As someone who was used to being ascetic, Chu Wanning had never seen such a carnal sight before, and his ears burned red as he hurriedly turned to leave.

Heaven only knew if the bottom of the pond was too slippery or if he had taken a false step, but he stumbled and fell face first into the pond, sending a big spray of water splashing into the air!

"Cough cough!!!!"

Chu Wanning's face was bright red with embarrassment and, flustered as he was, he'd even inadvertently swallowed some mouthfuls of water. Remembering that the water was technically used bathwater from that guy behind him, he was so indignant and disgusted that he threw all appearances of calm and composure aside, scrambling and flailing frantically as he tried to get back up.

He was *the* Yuheng Elder, how could——

In his panicked fluster, with no dignity left to speak of, there was suddenly a strong, shapely hand on him, pulling him up from the streaming waters. The man had obviously been startled by the happening behind him.

"Are you okay?"

With one hand around his arm, the man spoke in a deep, calming voice. The difference in their heights was such that his breath puffed out against Chu Wanning's ear as he lowered his head to speak, "Careful, it's slippery here."

Chu Wanning's ears burned even hotter; he could practically feel that person's chest behind him, mere inches from his back, rising and falling, rising and falling, a merciful relief in each fall like it was sparing his life, a menacing precarity in each rise as it threatened to brush against his back.

Chu Wanning was both indignant and mortified at once—never had he been touched by someone like this before!

Shaking the man's hand off of him, Chu Wanning's face was all surly, even as he avoided eye contact. "I'm fine."

The deafening sound of the waterfall's rushing waters all but covered up Chu Wanning's voice.

But the man jolted at his voice for some reason, going entirely still for a second before slowly lifting his hand like he wanted to say something, but didn't quite have the courage to...

In that moment of hesitation, Chu Wanning had already walked a ways into the distance and stepped into, or rather, went to hide inside the rushing, roaring

curtain of water.

Author's Notes:

This mini-theatre originates from an old joke *scratches head*

Mo Ran: Um...the title has already reminded Shizun that the ground is slippery, why did Shizun still slip? (LOL)

Chu Wan Ning: ...Isn't it pronounced "slip carefully"^[16]?

Ch.128 Shizun, You Can't Just Wear Whatever Clothes You Feel Like

Chu Wanning's heart beat fast, and he was so mad his face was a bit flushed.

He could see, out of the corner of his eyes, that the man was still standing there in the same spot, seemingly frozen. Chu Wanning did not look directly at him, but he could *feel* the man's stare on himself, open and blatant, like a sword just raised from the forging pool, hissing still with an overwhelming heat and vaporizing the curtain of water as it pierced right through the waterfall straight for him.

Chu Wanning felt absolutely scandalised for some reason. Expression growing even more sour, he bit down on his lip and moved to hide even deeper into the waterfall.

But the guy was an *idiot*, as it turned out. Chu Wanning scooted in to hide, and like a puppet on strings, he took a step forward too.
"....."

Chu Wanning was furious. There were always a couple of perverts at Sisheng Peak; there had even once been a woman who, instead of going to sleep at night like a normal person, had gone crawling up the roof at Red Lotus Pavilion to peek at him bathing. Just thinking about it made his scalp go numb, and goosebumps rose all along the arm that had gotten grabbed by that guy.

Luckily, after a while of him hiding in the waterfall as deep as he could go—inadvertently swallowing more than a few droplets of the water in the process—the guy finally decided to let him be, going back to the streaming water to continue rinsing, though he kept looking back as he walked away.

Holding down his anger the best he could, Chu Wanning was in no mood to soak in the baths anymore, thinking only to finish up and get out of there as soon as possible.

He reached for the towel draped over his shoulder, only to find that the towel, together with the soapberry^[17] and fragrance bar wrapped inside, had fallen into the water during his great tumble earlier.

They were probably dissolved by now...

Should he get out of the water to fetch another one?

But he was naked, and that would involve walking past that guy.

Chu Wanning's face had gone from red to blue. He pressed his thin lips tightly together, mortified.

He was *not* going.

So he remained standing there with his arms crossed over his chest and his back against the rock like an idiot, letting the water wash over him in the deepest part of the streaming waterfall.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

The man: “.....”

Suddenly, in the distance, that guy raised his voice and asked hesitantly, “Do you want a soapberry?”

“.....”

“And fragrance bars?”

“.....”

“Surely you’re not going to just wash like that?”

Closing his eyes and staying right where he was, Chu Wanning replied coldly, “Toss it over.”

But the guy didn’t toss it over, as if thinking that it would be rude to do that with a stranger. After waiting a while under the waterfall, Chu Wanning saw a peach leaf enchanted with spiritual power drift slowly toward him, bearing a soapberry and two fragrance bars.

Chu Wanning picked up the items, but then paused upon taking a closer look.

The soapberry was whatever, since everyone used basically the same thing, but that person had picked out a plum blossom scented fragrance bar and a haitang scented one, his favorite scents.

He glanced over at the tall figure in the distance through the sparkling, translucent curtain of water despite himself.

The man asked, “Those two scents okay?”

Chu Wanning replied, “Fine.”

The man said no more, and the two of them continued washing in silence from where they stood far apart, each occupied with his own thoughts. Chu Wanning felt a little more at ease as he washed, and so cautiously stepped back out from the depths of the waterfall, since the water stream where he was standing was actually a bit too strong for comfort.

But the man looked over again as soon as he came back out. It would’ve been one thing if he was just looking over, but there was always something weird in his stare, and Chu Wanning got the distinct impression that he wanted to say something to him but kept stopping himself, and kept wavering between coming closer or not, making Chu Wanning’s skin prickle all over.

Chu Wanning washed for a bit, but then couldn’t take it anymore and decided to leave first.

But he had left his clothes at the entrance, and he’d have to go back that way to get dressed. Having no other option, Chu Wanning could only brace himself and, with his face sullen and his teeth gritted, walked toward where the man was standing.

But unexpectedly, as he was walking past in front of the man, not all that close from him but also not far enough, that guy suddenly started moving too,

putting his long hair up and shaking the water from his fringe to follow Chu Wanning out of the bath.

The vein at Chu Wanning's temple throbbed. He started walking faster, but that guy was astoundingly shameless, and started walking faster as well.

Chu Wanning: "....."

The tips of his fingers had already begun to glow with the golden light of Tianwen, but he held back from summoning his weapon for the time being, not out of any concern about injuring someone, but solely because he felt that he should get dressed before beating anyone up.

So he picked up his speed even more.

This time, the man stopped instead of continuing to tail him.

Chu Wanning sighed in relief, but only managed to let out half his breath before he heard the man say from behind him, "There are... soap bubbles on your hair still."

"....."

"Aren't you gonna wash it off?"

The man approached slowly just as Chu Wanning was burning with anger, not stopping until he was very close, standing right behind him where his voice could be clearly heard.

If Chu Wanning hadn't been so furious right now, he would've been able to tell that the voice was somewhat familiar, despite the way it had changed. Unfortunately, he was currently engulfed by the flames of rage.

"You..." The man seemed to still have something else to say.

But Chu Wanning had reached the limits of his forbearance. He whipped around, golden light flashing to life in his hand as he lashed out toward the other with an audible *whoosh*, a dangerous glint in his eyes. Chu Wanning was so enraged that he almost wanted to just kill the guy and be done with it. "What the hell is *wrong* with you?!"

Tianwen cleaved through the hazy steam, snapping directly toward that person's chest.

For an instant, the golden glow lit up the man's face.

Chu Wanning saw a pair of eyes—clear, gentle, sheepish eyes that seemed to hold flowing rivers of stars within, like so many glimmering fireflies on the wind, yet were also tranquil as still waters running deep, veiling things bygone beneath.

...Mo Ran?!

He tried to pull back, but it was already too late, and the willow vine hissed as it struck Mo Ran's firm, smooth chest. Mo Ran let out only a stifled grunt, then lowered his head for a bit, and when he looked back up, there wasn't the slightest trace of anger or resentment in his eyes, but those eyes were a little wet, as if from the first rains of Lin'an.

Chu Wanning quickly recalled Tianwen and then stood there frozen in place.

A long while went by before he managed to say in a hoarse voice, "...Why didn't you dodge?"

Mo Ran replied, "Sh-Shizun..."

Chu Wanning was stunned. He had thought so many times about how the two of them might meet again, but never did he think it would be at Miaoyin Springs, in the hot spring pond. "What're you doing here? When did you get back?!"

"Just now," Mo Ran replied softly. "I got too dirty and unpresentable from rushing to get back, so I came here to take a bath before going to see Shizun, I didn't expect..."

"....." Chu Wanning was speechless.

Neither of them had expected something like this to happen.

They had both wanted their reunion to be proper and dignified.

Mo Ran had probably wanted to appear before Chu Wanning clean and well-dressed.

But in the end?

Not only was it not proper, it was straight-up laughable.

Not only was it not dignified, it was absolutely ridiculous.

Not only were they not well-dressed, they were completely naked.

They *were* clean though.

So clean they didn't even have a single thread of clothing on.

"Shizun, it's really...it's really you..." Mo Ran, for his part, didn't care much about these things. For five years, Chu Wanning had slept, and he had been awake; what was only the span of a dream to Chu Wanning had been more than a thousand torturous days to him.

His frame of mind was far more complicated than Chu Wanning's. Forcing down his overwhelming emotions, the rims of his eyes were a little red as he said, "It's been so long that I, just now...I didn't dare believe my eyes. I thought I might've had the wrong person, I thought..."

"....." Head ringing, Chu Wanning was at a loss for words. It was a long moment before he said, "...Why didn't you just ask me if you weren't sure? Instead of creeping after me silently like that."

"I did want to ask," Mo Ran said softly, "but it's been five years...and then to suddenly...see Shizun right in front of me, I thought...I thought I was dreaming..."

The more nervous as I get closer to home, I dare not ask even the passersby.^[18]

What he felt, when he first saw his silhouette, was probably something like that.

He had already had such dreams too many times in the past five years; he was afraid that it was more of the same madness again, that he would wake up with tear stains on his pillow to find that the reunion was just another joyous delusion.

Chu Wanning forced a calm exterior, but his insides were a frantic mess. It was hard work, really, to speak with such stiff dryness though his heart felt all soft and gooey. "...What kind of dream would be this absurd."

Mo Ran paused for a beat at Chu Wanning's response, as if remembering something. He pressed his lips together as a light flickered in his eyes. He wasn't originally going to bring this up as soon as they met again, but after a bit of hesitation, he decided that if he didn't say it now, while Chu Wanning hadn't yet had a chance to build up his walls, he probably wouldn't get another chance later on.

So he spoke after a pause, "...Does Shizun not remember?"

"Remember what?"

Mo Ran's eyes were deep and dark. "What you said to me before, that the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever real."

"That was because..." Chu Wanning caught himself mid-sentence, suddenly realizing that those were the words he had spoken to Mo Ran at Jincheng Lake as he was saving him. He had said something so melancholic because of how miserable he'd felt back then, and he was a little surprised that Mo Ran could still remember it so easily even after this long.

But how did Mo Ran know that it had actually been him at Jincheng Lake? Had Shi Mei told him?

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes to look at him, only to see Mo Ran looking back at himself. Only then did he realize that Mo Ran didn't actually know the truth, and was only saying that to see his reaction.

Mo Ran said softly, "So it really was Shizun, then."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran lifted his hand. His chest had been slashed open, and blood seeped from the wound. He smiled wryly. "I did a lot of thinking about the past during these last couple of years. I wanted to know just what Shizun had done for me. I thought about a lot of things that happened, including the illusion at Jincheng Lake——Shi Mei never calls me by name."

He paused before continuing. "Those memories tormented me the more I thought about them; there were a lot of things I wanted to ask Shizun about once you're awake."

"....."

"But the thing I wanted to ask about the most was...Shizun, the one who saved me at the bottom of the lake back then, it was you, wasn't it?"

Mo Ran walked closer as he spoke. Chu Wanning wanted to back away.

Because he suddenly noticed just how tall Mo Ran was, tall like a mountain, a powerful strength latent in every inch of his body. He suddenly noticed just how bright Mo Ran's eyes were, like the very sun had fallen into those twin pools, all the colors of the sunrise splashing across those gleaming waters.

Chu Wanning found himself flustered for no reason whatsoever. He said, "It wasn't me."

Mo Ran didn't buy it at all.

Chu Wanning scrambled to change the subject in a panic, grasping desperately at straws; but he was so startled, so nervous, and so discomfited, that he completely forgot that he had already asked the question just now, and Mo Ran had already answered it as well.

Looking at this person whose chest bore a gash inflicted by he himself, he said once more, "Why didn't you dodge when I hurt you earlier?"

Mo Ran stilled for a second, then dropped his thick curtain of lashes with a smile.

"You said that dreams that were too good to be true probably weren't." And so he answered once more as well, pausing before continuing in a murmur, "I wanted to see if it would hurt. If it hurts, then it's not a dream."

He had walked over and now stood right in front of Chu Wanning.

Maybe it was because of how sudden the reunion had been, but the joy and fondness in his heart, the tenderness and the heartbreak overtook all else, but

Mo Ran thought of nothing else, no flights of fancy. He even forgot to maintain a proper distance from Chu Wanning, a distance of propriety between a disciple and his master.

But he didn't.

Whenever his emotions ran deep, he'd always think of the person before him as Wanning rather than Shizun.

Mo Ran's eyes grew even more red and watery. He lifted an arm with a grin—"I think some water got in my eyes just now"—and wiped his face, along with his eyes.

Chu Wanning stared up at him in a daze. He'd been waiting for Mo Ran to come back this whole time, so he was a little more clear headed than Mo Ran right now, but the bit of clarity also afforded him enough presence of mind to notice the condition that the two of them were currently in—talking face to face while standing there buck-naked. And not only that, but Mo Ran was so close to him that, if he were to come just a little bit closer, he'd be able to wrap his arms around him the way he had back in the Underworld.

He didn't want to continue looking up at Mo Ran's unfairly handsome face, but when he dropped his gaze a couple inches lower, the sight that greeted him was that of broad shoulders and firm chest, the blood from Tianwen's strikes spreading slowly, and droplets of water that trembled minutely with every breath that Mo Ran drew. Chu Wanning couldn't even tell which was hotter, this sculpted chest or the heated water of the hot springs.

All he knew was that he was surrounded by Mo Ran's scent, and that it was going to steal his soul away.

"Shizun, I..."

I what?

But before Mo Ran could even really say anything yet, Chu Wanning abruptly turned around and took off running.

"....."

Mo Ran was flabbergasted.

He was quite literally *running*.

It was the first time he'd ever seen Chu Wanning flee in such a hurry, running away like there was something behind him that was gonna eat him alive and chew up his soul.

"I've really missed you so much."

Mo Ran finished lamely where he stood, then pursed his lips.

What had he run away for...

Mo Ran felt a little wronged.

When he got out of the pond and saw Chu Wanning, whose face was alternating between red and blue as he scrambled frantically to get dressed, he felt even more wronged.

"Shizun," he mumbled.

Chu Wanning ignored him.

"Shizun..."

Chu Wanning continued to ignore him while wrapping the belt sash around his waist.

"Shizunnnnn..."

"*WHAT!*" Dressed at long last, Chu Wanning could finally let out a breath, feeling his dignity and composure return to his body now that it was covered.

His sword-straight brows slanted in anger, and his stern phoenix eyes glared fiercely at that traitorous disciple of his who dared to be taller than him.

"What's so important that you can't wait til we're outside to say it!? Talking to me naked like that, have you no shame!"

A little chagrined, Mo Ran raised a fist to his lips and cleared his throat. "... It's not like I want to be naked."

"Then why aren't you getting dressed!"

"..." Mo Ran paused, looking away to stare at a peach tree on the side as he began, "...So, it's like this..."

He took a deep breath, and finally steeled himself to say:

"Shizun, those are my clothes you're wearing."

Done with that, a faint blush spread across Mo Ran's cheeks as he stared fixedly at a branch of peach blossoms swaying gently in the breeze.

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre:

Many anonymous comments appeared on the Sisheng Peak chat forum today.

Anonymous user: Accidentally wore my disciple's clothes, what should I do? Urgent, I don't want to strip in front of him. Staying online to await replies.

Anonymous user A: Sent a pile of gifts, but they were all rejected by my male god, though he did accept my handicrafts. I want to know if it's because he treats me as an outsider, or if it's because he can't bear to see me spend money. I'm actually not poor, although my name isn't in the rankings, I can still afford the limited edition jujube pills produced by Hanlin Shengshou...why? Why does he not accept my gifts? I'm so troubled.

Anonymous user B: Ai, my emotions are somewhat complicated, he's returned.

Anonymous user C: Did the top stop spinning in the end? Is this real life or is this just a dream, which level of my dream is this? Don't mind me, I just wanted somewhere secure to vent.

Ch.129 Shizun, Do You Like What You See?

For a split second, chaos ensued in Chu Wanning's head like the churning of the seas, the lashing of torrential rains, the booming of thunder, the flashing of lightning, the darkening of clouds.

To take it off or to keep it on.

A most pivotal question.

Keeping it on seemed inappropriate, now that he knew he had put on the wrong clothes, and it wasn't like he could just pretend he hadn't heard what Mo Ran had said just now.

Taking it off...?

He couldn't possibly handle the embarrassment of it, to take off the clothes he'd finally put on, piece by piece, with Mo Ran *right there*.

A few moments passed in an awkward silence.

Mo Ran spoke up, "But I've washed those clothes very thoroughly, they're very clean, so if Shizun doesn't mind, then...please feel free to wear them."

Chu Wanning: "Mn."

Mo Ran let out a breath of relief. He'd always been a bit slow, and hadn't even realized when he'd spoken earlier that saying that when Chu Wanning was already mostly dressed would be nothing short of forcing Shizun to strip in front of him.

He was singed by just the tiny spark of that mental image.

Mo Ran's face burned even redder, but luckily he'd been out and about these last couple of years, and was no longer as tender-skinned as he used to be, so it wasn't too noticeable on his tanned skin the color of wheat. But his heartbeats felt too loud by half, and his conscience was terribly guilty and terribly afraid that Chu Wanning would hear it, so he hurriedly lowered his head to go pick up Chu Wanning's robes and clothe himself.

They looked at each other after both getting dressed, only to fall into a different kind of awkward silence.

It didn't fit.

Chu Wanning's robes were clearly too small for Mo Ran, not even folding over in the front, leaving it wide open to reveal a large expanse of firm, honey-colored chest. And too short, too; the way half his legs weren't even covered like he was flat broke was a sorry look, to be sure.

Chu Wanning's situation was no better, either; Mo Ran's robes draped over him, covering him to the toe and pooling on the ground, dragging behind him like a wisp of white mist. It looked fine and proper and all, but it also meant that he was now so much shorter than Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning was a bit affronted.

Expression sullen, he said, "Leaving."

As in, "I'm leaving."

But Mo Ran misunderstood and thought he was inviting him to go together, so he nodded and took the initiative to pick up his shizun's wooden washbin and change of clothes, and earnestly followed behind him.

Chu Wanning: "....."

The two of them got to the entrance of the baths and lifted the curtains. It was cooler outside, away from the hot springs, and Chu Wanning shivered at the autumn chill despite himself. Noticing, Mo Ran asked, "Are you cold?"

"No."

But how could Mo Ran not know by now that it was just prideful words? So he said with a smile, "I'm a little cold," and lifted a hand, gesturing in the air. With a flourish of his hand, a scarlet glow sprang from his palm to form a cold-warding barrier around the two of them. The barrier was beautiful, its radiance shimmering and flowing, with a scattering of flower motifs at the top.

Chu Wanning glanced up at it, expression unreadable. "Not bad, you've improved."

"I'm still nowhere near Shizun's level."

"You're not far off. My own cold-warding barriers are probably no better than this." Chu Wanning gazed at the barrier for a while, and then, noticing the faint flowers, commented, "The peach blossoms are a nice touch."

"They're haitang blossoms."

Chu Wanning's heart tremored, sending ripples reflecting through the depths of his eyes.

Mo Ran continued, "Five petals."

"....." Chu Wanning couldn't help the puff of laughter that escaped as he instinctively tried to hide the quivering in his eyes with feigned nonchalance. He said with a slightly mocking tone, "Copying me now, are we?"

But to his surprise, Mo Ran only looked at him with a pair of open, guileless eyes before nodding in response. "It's a poor imitation, I'm afraid."

Chu Wanning was left rather speechless.

They walked side by side in silence for a while, then Chu Wanning picked up his pace, not wanting to be right next to him like this. Behind him, Mo Ran suddenly asked, "Shizun, are you...mad that I didn't make it back in time for the banquet?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Why would I bother lying?"

"Then why are you walking so fast?"

Of course Chu Wanning wasn't going to say "Because you're too tall." He was silent for a moment, before he looked up at the sky and bluffed, "Because it looks like it's going to rain soon."

As if he'd jinxed it, drops of rain really did start falling from the overcast sky not long after, pitter-pattering into a curtain.

Mo Ran smiled.

His smile was every bit as lovely as it had been five years ago, but even more dazzling now for the newfound sincerity in it.

Chu Wanning glared at him. "What's that stupid grin for?"

"Nothing." Mo Ran's dimples were deep and sweet.

The young man, tall and well-built, returned his gaze with downcast lashes and a docile, obedient demeanor completely free of overbearance.

He was even a little bashful as he said, "I'm just really happy to see Shizun again after so long."

"....."

Chu Wanning stared at him, stared at the dimples in his cheek. He had once thought that those twin pools of sweetness would always belong to Shi Mingjing alone, but that turned out not to be the case—all he had to do to be allowed a jar of the sweetness for himself was to give up his life.

Chu Wanning scolded him, "Dummy."

Mo Ran let his long, soft eyelashes droop, and grinned big and wide like a dummy.

Getting a little carried away in the moment, Mo Ran accidentally stepped on the hem he'd been so careful not to step on this whole time. With a stern expression, Chu Wanning looked at the ground and then at him, but said nothing.

Mo Ran was very straightforward. "The clothes are a little big on Shizun."

“.....” He sure did know exactly what *not* to say.

Mo Ran walked Chu Wanning all the way back to Red Lotus Pavilion. Truth be told, Chu Wanning found it to be a rather strange experience, since he'd always come and gone alone, and rarely ever had the occasion to share an umbrella with someone else, be it an oilpaper umbrella or a barrier one.

So, halfway there, he stopped walking and said, “I can do it myself, it's just a barrier.”

Mo Ran was a little taken aback. “Wasn't everything going just fine? So why...”

“What kind of master makes their disciple hold the umbrella.”

“But Shizun has done so much for me.” Mo Ran said after a moment of silence, his voice low and quiet. “These last five years, I spent every single day hoping to be just a little bit better. Because Shizun is so capable and can do everything by himself, I wanted to be able to do just a little more than Shizun, so that I could be of use to Shizun, to repay Shizun. But even after all the training and studying I did, I still feel no closer. I'm afraid that I might never be able to repay Shizun's kindness, so that's why...”

He lowered his head, hand subconsciously clenching into a fist at his side. The rainwater gathered into streaming rivulets on the ground, droplets splashing and rippling out like blooming flowers.

“That's why, from now on, just let me take care of the little things like holding the umbrella.”

Chu Wanning said nothing, only watching him quietly.

“I want to hold an umbrella over Shizun for as long as I live.”

“.....” Chu Wanning felt a burning in his chest. It was such a heart-warming thing to hear, but he suddenly found himself wanting to cry instead. He was someone who had gone through so much suffering and braved it all.

He was like a traveller who had walked for far too long, who had finally found shelter and could lie down for a rest.

Even his bones felt like they might fall apart as he collapsed.

This lifetime.

Mo Ran was twenty two this year. The saying went that time passed differently once someone was past twenty. Before twenty, a mere three or five years felt so long it could be called a lifetime.

But once past twenty, time would suddenly feel like a racing current, everything surging past in a rush with no return.

He said he would pause from the racing current to hold an umbrella over him.

Chu Wanning had so rarely received any kindness that, to have his chest suddenly flooded by tenderness like this, all he felt was pain instead. He stared at Mo Ran, stared at that person standing there with his head lowered, and suddenly said, “Mo Ran, look at me.”

He lifted his head.

Chu Wanning said, “Say that again.”

Mo Ran gazed at him. His face was still a bit unfamiliar-looking to Chu Wanning; it was different from the one in his memories, and different from the

one in those absurd dreams he once had.

He was gentle, composed, and steadfast, with the warmth of fire and the firmness of iron as he met Chu Wanning's eyes with neither hesitation nor avoidance.

When Chu Wanning had looked at him for the last time, five years ago, he had still been just a growing boy.

In a blink, he had already grown into this handsome, confident man before him.

This man, who was dropping to one knee in front of him, looking up at him, and saying, "Shizun, I want to hold an umbrella over you for as long as I live."

Chu Wanning stared at him in a daze, stared at those dark eyebrows and that shapely jawline, stared at those bright eyes and that straight nose.

He had already grown into an impressive pine tree, had grown to his own height, and then overtaken him. One day, this tree that had stood in the wind and rain for so long, this tree that was Chu Wanning, suddenly woke up, blinked, and found that the rain had stopped, the clouds had dispersed, and in the soft light of the sun, there was another tree standing next to him that was even taller and steadier than he was, and when the wind rustled through the leaves, the sunlight filtering through sparkled like gold dust.

This tree said he wanted to stay by his side for a lifetime.

Until they both fell over, branches bare and withered. But until then, every season from now on, he would never be alone again.

As he stared at him, Chu Wanning was struck with the sudden realization that Mo Ran was no longer the bloodied, unconscious disciple he had carried back from Butterfly Town five years ago.

Standing there in the rain, under the haitang blossoms dancing atop the barrier, he looked at Mo Ran for the first time, thoroughly and carefully, looked at this man who was promising him a lifetime.

Chu Wanning's heartbeat abruptly began to race.

He suddenly noticed just how alluring Mo Ran looked now, everything from the arc of his nose to the shape of his lips, from the line of his jaw to the jut of his throat.

What he felt for Mo Ran before was only love, something that could be kept hidden. But after meeting him again today, this man felt like nothing short of a fire to him, a fire that could so easily set him ablaze like he was mere kindling, sending flames soaring up and scorching the very skies.

He felt the magma that had been lying dormant all this time stirring awake and stretching its limbs in the abyss deep within himself, ready to burst out in a violent eruption at any time.

The magma threatened to burn through the reservations, dignity, and self-control he had always prided himself on...

Threatened to burn it all to ash.

Until there was nothing left.

Author's Notes:

There are perks on Weibo today~

Thank you “Yuan Zi’er” for Shizun and Feeding Fish, the Shizun he first met under the flowering tree is especially gentle, and is probably Dog’s first impression of this immortal-gege. The Shizun leaving under an umbrella is also so entrancing, I can stare at this picture for five minutes!!! Dog’s bright smile makes my heart melt, really thankuwu so much~

Thank you “Firewood” for 0.5 Dog. I’ve just come to the flashbacks of right before 0.5 Dog’s blackening in my saved drafts today, where he’s already at the grey stage, and then I saw this picture and felt that it really had that feeling, like a good teenager heading down the path towards Taxian-Jun! There’s still youth lingering on his brow and in his eyes, but there’s already some danger and wickedness to his smile, *ahahah*, so dreamy^[19]~ thanks~

Thankieww Mr Chen for drawing “Bugui”, Dog’s weapon. Bugui is a *Mo* sabre (*Mo Dao*), I’ll drop some information here, the *Mo* sabre is a type of Tang dynasty sabre, and actually looks a lot like a sword: long, and narrow. It’s not a dagger, *aihehe*~ It’s also not a machete~~

Revamping the character info card
Mo Ran 2.0

Name: ~~Feeding fish~~ Weiyu

Posthumous title: ...I’m not dead!!!

Occupation: Emperor (reborn)...Oh, that’s incorrect, I’m no longer an emperor in this lifetime, I’m an unemployed vagrant (the kind that specialises in doing good deeds)

Appearance in society: (strikethrough) Lei Feng^[20] (strikethrough) Mo-zongshi

Currently likes: To see everyone living well without troubles

Favourite food: Wontons

Hates: The people by his side leaving him

Height: 189cm

Mo Ran 0.5 has something to say: What right does he have to be 3cm taller than me?

Meatbun: Oh, because he went through puberty differently. You spent your days researching the Zhenlong Chess Formation in a dark room, but he ran around under the sun to many places. So while you two are the same person, due to different environments later on in life, you’re 3cm shorter. Sorry, Your Majesty, but you’re no longer the tallest person in the novel now. *smiles*

^[1] To clarify, the meaning here is that it’s Shizun who is the zongshi, as opposed to Mo Ran, who doesn’t think himself worthy of the title

^[2] Nangong Si’s given name, Si 驷 is made up of the characters 马匹 which means horse

^[3] The actual phrase used here was 却之不恭 which technically means “It’d be impolite to decline” but it’s deeply rooted in the “you gotta at least try to pretend to decline gifts etc” aspect of Chinese culture, and just sounds like he’s very reluctant to go in English, so I opted for an acceptance with a more accurate tone instead.

^[4] 九转肥肠 [braised pork intestine](#)

^[5] 青涩 is used here to describe Song Qitong both metaphorically as a fruit, where it means green/underripe, and as a person, where it means young, inexperienced, like a bashful new love

^[6] 生旦净末丑 roles in Peking opera: 生 sheng (main male role), 旦 dan (female role), 净 jing (painted face male role), and 丑 chou (male clown role); [click here for an](#)

[overview](#).

[7] 花旦 huadan, role of the vivacious young female, a subset of the dan role; 武生 wusheng, role of the martial male, a subset of the sheng role

[8] Du Fu's "Dreaming of Li Bai"

[9] 走马灯 [carousel lantern](#), popular at Lantern Festival

[10] Again, not literally his uncle. It's common in Chinese to politely refer to older people as uncle/aunt

[11] 桃宝 Taobao here uses different characters from the taobao website [淘宝], but sure does sound the same...

[12] 苦 can mean both bitter (taste) and hardship, so CWN said "it must've been hard" and XM's reply was basically that it was worth it/he has no complaints sometimes... a pun just... doesn't translate...

[13] 大龄剩男: A man of a certain age (about 40 years old or over) who's unable to get married because he's undesirable.

[14] 昙花 Queen of the night is a flower that blooms rarely and only at night, and the flower wilts before dawn

[15] 妙音池 the miao yin in Miaoyin Springs means beautiful (musical) sounds/tones

[16] The title is 小心地滑

小心 means be careful/watch out

地 when pronounced as "dì" means ground, but when pronounced as "de" is a structural particle used before a verb or adjective to link it to a preceding modifying adverb, i.e., -ly

滑 means slip

so 小心地滑 can be either "小心 be careful 地滑 the ground is slippery" or "小心地 carefully 滑 slip"

[17] 皂角 Chinese honey locust [soapberry](#)

[18] Excerpt from poem "Crossing the Han River" by Tang Dynasty poet Song Zhiwen aka Li Pin, about being away from home without news, and the anxiety one experiences upon returning (due to not knowing if the family has been well, etc.):

From beyond the mountains I've had news and letters neither, thus has winter gone and spring come.

The more nervous as I get closer to home, I dare not ask even the passersby.

[19] Original term (苏到爆) comes from Mary Sue (玛丽苏), I guess Meatbun's saying that this Mo Ran is so ideal

[20] Lei Feng: A Communist legend whose name is now synonymous with selflessness and modesty in the Mainland Chinese lexicon due to his contributions to the Party.

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.130 Shizun, I've Crossed Five Years To Come See You

>>self harm

Chu Wanning's breathing was a little heavy, and his throat a little dry.

He refused to give in just like that, and opted instead for being difficult. Holding down the fire raging in his chest, he asked, mild as ever, "For as long as you live?"

"For as long as I live."

"...I might walk very fast, with no regard for you."

"That's alright, I'll chase after you."

"I might not want to walk anymore and just stand there."

"I'll stand with Shizun."

Agitated by his unhesitating answer, Chu Wanning swept his sleeves and said, "Then what if I just can't walk anymore?"

"Then I'll carry^[1] you."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran paused, realizing that that might have been a little disrespectful, rude even. Eyes widening, he hurriedly waved his hand and amended, "I'll carry you on my back."

Chu Wanning's heart beat faster and faster, and it took everything he had to hold back the urge to help this man up, to touch him. He furrowed his brows at this urge, looking anxious and a bit cross. "Who wants to be carried by you."

Mo Ran opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say.

His shizun was just difficult like that—didn't wanna be carried on his back or in his arms; it wasn't like he could carry him lifted up over his head, and he certainly couldn't drag him on the ground. He felt like he was too dumb to figure out how to make Chu Wanning happy.

At a loss, his head drooped, like an abandoned stray dog.

He muttered in a small voice, "Then I'll stop walking too."

"....."

"If you want to get rained on, then I'll keep you company through that too."

Chu Wanning was at his wit's end from this relentless onslaught. He was so used to doing everything by himself that he blurted out without thinking, "I don't want your company."

Mo Ran finally stopped talking. From where he was standing, Chu Wanning could only see his wide forehead, dark eyebrows, and a pair of long eyelashes that were downcast and quivering slightly, like curtains rising and falling in the wind.

"Shizun..." Mo Ran had misunderstood the feelings behind Chu Wanning's agitated refusal. He asked, "Are you still mad at me...?"

Drowning helplessly in the pounding of his own heart, Chu Wanning didn't quite catch what he said, and so only replied, "What?"

"Back in the Underworld, I already apologized to Shizun, many, many times, but I know it's not enough. I spent every moment of these past five years feeling guilty, I know I owe you."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"I want to do better too, so that I won't feel too dirty to stand before you, so that I'll at least be able to lift my head in front of you. But I...I can't catch up to you...every day when I wake up I worry if I was dreaming, that you'll be gone if I were to wake up from the dream. I keep hearing the words you'd said at

Jincheng Lake when you were saving me, that the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever real, and then I just...I just get so sad..."

Mo Ran's voice grew a little hoarse.

He still had some things to say, but he didn't want to say them. He didn't feel like he had any right to keep talking about these things in front of Chu Wanning, didn't have the heart to let Chu Wanning know what had happened in these last five years.

Sometimes...all alone in the Snow Valley, he couldn't tell what day it was, or even where he was. He'd prick himself with a needle then, again and again between the joints of his fingers. It hurt, but that was how he could tell that he was still conscious, still alive.

That was how he could tell that he wasn't still in his previous life, dreaming all of this up. That when he woke up it wouldn't be to a Sisheng Peak stripped of all familiarity, a Xue Meng with eyes full of hate, and a Rufeng Sect that had been demolished to the ground. That if he were to go to the Red Lotus Pavilion, he wouldn't see Chu Wanning lying there, looking as if he were still alive.

As if he were still alive, as if he were still alive.
Which words could hurt more than these.

It was strange, now that he thought about it—when he'd found out that Chu Wanning had died to save him, and when he'd gone down to the Underworld on that rescue mission, his heart had ached then, but not with the kind of irrepressible despair that he felt now.

But as time went by, day after day.

As it came closer and closer to the time for Chu Wanning's awakening, Mo Ran only felt the pain growing worse, like there was a knife cutting into his heart.

Maybe it was because he had too much time to think in those days he spent alone, or maybe it was because, during that time without Chu Wanning, he had tried so desperately, even hysterically, to imitate that person, to the extent that he wanted to tear himself apart entirely to reassemble into Chu Wanning's form.

Whatever the reason, many things that he had never really paid attention to or thought about, things that he had gradually forgotten, all of it resurfaced in his mind. Those things of the bygone past were like waterlogged shoals exposed in the wake of the retreating tide, and he stood all alone at the shore, but the waves were already gone.

He could see it all so clearly now.

He thought about the past life, surrounded by the beacons of war on all sides, at the end of his road.

Xue Meng had come to Sisheng Peak, and in a Wushan Palace changed beyond recognition, Xue Meng had interrogated him with tears in his eyes.

Demanded to know, why had he done this to his own shizun.

Xue Meng had tried to force him then, force him to turn back before death

He had said, Mo Ran.

Think back properly. Let go of your vicious hatred. Look back.

He once trained you in cultivation and martial arts, and made sure to protect you.

He once taught you how to read and write, taught you poetry and painting.

He once learned how to cook just for you, even though he was so clumsy and got cuts all over his hands.

He once... He once waited every day for you to come home, all alone by himself, from nightfall...til the break of dawn...

Mo Ran hadn't listened back then, had refused to look.

Now he stood at the coast of fate, where the tide had receded, and when he looked down, there was a lost heart under his foot, a heart that had once been so good to him, so genuine to him that it had nearly driven itself to death.

But he had been so set in his ways that he had seen none of that as he'd trod it underfoot.

He had trod Chu Wanning's very heart underfoot just like that!

A chill ran through Mo Ran's body whenever he thought about it. What had he done...just what had he *done*? Two lifetimes, sixteen years, had he ever repaid Chu Wanning's kindness? Had he ever, even just for one day, put Chu Wanning first in his heart?!

Damn beast!!!

Was his heart made of stone before? How else could it have not hurt?!

These past five years, how many times had he dreamt of Chu Wanning's return, in robes white as snow, looking just the way he'd used to.

When he woke, the pillow would be wet. And every single day he would say, Chu Wanning, Shizun, I'm sorry, I was wrong, I was wrong.

Every day he would say it, but it never lessened the guilt any.

Later on, when he'd seen the blooming flowers of spring, he would think of him, and when he'd seen the falling snows of winter, he would think of him as well.

Later on, every daybreak was golden like Chu Wanning's soul. Every nightfall was dark like Chu Wanning's eyes. Later on, every beam of white moonlight was like the snow on his sleeves, every rising sun was like the warmth in his eyes. Later on, he'd seen Chu Wanning's silhouette in the vermilion clouds by the horizon, in the cerulean light of dawn, in the surging, billowing clouds.

He was everywhere.

Because of this anguish and yearning that he'd felt, he'd gradually grown less resentful about being low-born, gradually felt less strongly about his nearly fanatical adoration of Shi Mei.

One day, outside Snow Valley, he had seen a snow-covered winter jasmine growing out of a crack in the wall.

He had gazed at it quietly for a while, thinking the same thing he always did. He had thought, *ah, what a pretty flower, Shizun would definitely like it if he could see.*

It had been such a cursory thought, about the simplest, most casual and unimportant little thing.

But between one breath and the next, all the sorrows that hadn't managed to drive him out of his mind and force him to his knees back when Chu Wanning had died suddenly rushed toward him all at once. The saying went that a thousand-mile long levee would be destroyed by mere ant tunnels—he broke down all of a sudden.

He bawled miserably, startling geese into flight from the depths of the valley. His cries were hoarse and ugly, a disgrace to the golden blossom that was blooming despite the snow.

It had been five years.

But he had never once forgiven himself.

"Shizun...sorry...I really tried my best to make it back in time today, and even had a present for you so that I wouldn't be empty-handed when I saw you..."
The forced composure finally faded, the feigned ease finally collapsed.

Kneeling in front of Chu Wanning, Mo Ran finally fell apart; truth be told, it was only in front of Chu Wanning that the Mo Ran of today would let himself fall apart like this.

"I'm...still really stupid. I couldn't even manage the first thing I promised you after your revival. It's my fault."

Chu Wanning could hardly bear to see him like this. He had always adored Mo Ran, and now that they had finally been reunited after such a long time apart, of course he didn't have the heart to watch him be so miserable.

But hearing his words, Chu Wanning hesitated before asking, "Why didn't you get back in time today?"

"There actually...was enough time to make it back. But I ran into some fiends making trouble at Butterfly Town, so I..."

"Got held up clearing them out?"

"Sorry." Mo Ran kept his head down. "Not only did I get held up, but even the present I had prepared for Shizun got destroyed...and I also got blood splattered all over myself, so I rushed here to wash it off, only to..."

Chu Wanning could feel his heart going soft.

Mo-zongshi.

This Mo Ran was indeed nothing like how he used to be five years ago.

The Mo Ran of five years ago had been a selfish brat, but now he knew the weight of things. Chu Wanning wasn't one to obsess over things like festivities and indulgences; in fact, if Mo Ran had seen the demon problem at Butterfly Town and had chosen to ignore it, Chu Wanning would've been furious with him. But looking at this man kneeling before himself now, all honesty and clumsiness as he asked for forgiveness, Chu Wanning instead found him to be so dumb it was kind of cute.

Chu Wanning stepped forward slowly, a warm feeling flowing in his heart. He reached out and was just about to help Mo Ran up when he heard him mutter, "Shizun, please don't kick me out from the sect."

Now it was Chu Wanning's turn to be taken aback. He didn't know the depth of Mo Ran's guilt and remorse, so he hadn't expected Mo Ran to say something like that. Hesitatingly, he said, "What..."

"Even if you don't want me to stay with you or chase after you when it rains, even if you don't want me to carry you, even if you don't want any of that, even still, please don't kick me out."

Mo Ran finally lifted his head. Chu Wanning's heart tremored.

He saw the faint redness in the rims of his eyes, and the way his eyes were a little watery.

Chu Wanning was usually firm and decisive, but now he found himself at a complete loss. "You... you're twenty-two already, why are you still..."

He paused and let out a long sigh, then said, "Get up first."

Lifting an arm to rub forcefully at his eyes, Mo Ran said stubbornly, "I'm not getting up if Shizun doesn't want me."

...Still a scoundrel, alright!

Chu Wanning could feel a headache coming on. Lips pressed into a thin line, he grabbed Mo Ran by the wrist and hauled him up.

But the moment the tips of his fingers made contact, all he could feel was the strength in those muscles and the heat of his skin. The firm body of this young man was also nothing like how it had been when he was younger. Just one touch made Chu Wanning's heart pound right out of his chest, and he let go abruptly, caught off guard.

Luckily Mo Ran was currently too distraught to notice Chu Wanning's strange behavior. But Chu Wanning stared at his own hand in disbelief for a moment while bewilderment raged within.

Just what...was wrong with him?

Had the five years of slumber undone all the asceticism and reservations he had?

But then, looking up at Mo Ran with astonishment...

Or was it because this person in front of him had really changed too much, so much so that it made it hard for him to control himself?

Mo Ran worried his lip for a bit, then seemed to make up his mind to be obstinate about it, to be so obstinate that he couldn't even *be* kicked out. "Please don't kick me out, Shizun."

He made to kneel back down as he spoke.

How could Chu Wanning possibly risk having to help him up a second time? He hurriedly stopped him with a stern, "Don't you kneel again! I'll really toss you out if you do!"

"....." Mo Ran paused and blinked, and then suddenly figured it out. Eyes lighting up, he said, "Shizun, you aren't blaming me...you're not mad cause I didn't make it back for the banquet? You..."

Chu Wanning snapped, "Have I ever been that petty?"

Mo Ran excitedly tried to hug him. Chu Wanning was spooked to say the least, hastily taking a step back and scolding with a frown, "What do you think you're doing? Where's your propriety?"

"Ah." Realizing his mistake, Mo Ran apologized in a hurry, "Sorry sorry, I forgot myself for a minute."

The tips of Chu Wanning's ears were bright red even as he tried to play it cool. "Already in your twenties and still don't know your manners."

The tips of Mo Ran's ears turned red as well as he mumbled, "It was my bad."

"It was my bad" was practically his catchphrase at this point. Hearing him say it, Chu Wanning felt a little mad, a little amused, a little pitying, and a little warm.

Eyelashes flickering upward, he secretly stole another glance at Mo Ran from the corners of his eyes.

He saw a tall, handsome man with sun-kissed skin; perhaps it was because of the lingering steam from the hot spring, or perhaps it was due to something else altogether, but his cheeks were a little flushed and a little warm, and he seemed to practically glow with the vibrancy of youth, so bright as to vaporize the steam in the air, making that pair of dark, shining eyes seem all the brighter.

Ba-dump.

Chu Wanning felt his own heart thud against his ribcage, and the tips of his fingers felt as if they were on fire again, like earlier when he had touched Mo Ran. His throat was suddenly incredibly dry, and he dared not look at Mo Ran again as he muttered, "Idiot," and turned to leave.

But the barrier above him didn't even shift—Mo Ran really did chase after him, just like he had promised.

Chu Wanning dropped his eyelids and didn't dare look back, well aware that he could no longer hide the love and desire in his eyes, just as it was impossible

to cover up the burning at his fingertips.

He had finally ruined him.

This man had done everything that the Mo Ran of five years ago couldn't, had taken his heart and drowned him in the ocean of lust^[2].

Henceforth Chu Wanning would be a mere mortal, with a body of flesh and a soul defenseless against desire, trapped in the web, unable to escape.

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre "Shizun's Back-to-School Quiz"

Chu Wan Ning: Come, let's play a round of Trivial Pursuit. Don't worry, these are all easy questions you can score on.

Dog: Okokok!

Chu Wan Ning: How many petals does haitang have?

Dog: Five!

Chu Wan Ning: What species of haitang are the ones in Red Lotus Pavilion?

Dog: Midget crabapple!

Chu Wan Ning: Shi Mei's height?

Dog: 183cm!

Chu Wan Ning: Xue Meng's height?

Dog: Hahaha, 178cm.

Xue Meng: ...ffs, what's so funny?

Chu Wan Ning: Your height?

Dog: Hahahahahahaha 189cm!

Xu Meng: Oh.

Chu Wan Ning: My height?

Mo Ran: 1...*cough*, 8.1m

Chu Wan Ning: Adequate, you passed the test, I won't kick you out from under my tutelage.

Ch.131 Shizun Does Some Reading

That night, Chu Wanning lay in his bed in the Red Lotus Pavillion, tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep.

He was contemplating how Mo Ran had ended up growing into the man that he was now. Mo-zongshi, Mo Weiyu; all he could see when he closed his eyes were that man's handsome features, and those bright, steady eyes that held determination and tenderness both.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and vehemently kicked the quilt off the bed, then proceeded to starfish in bed while staring up at the roof beams with a tormented gaze.

He tried all that he could to get out from the ocean of lust, to cut off the threads of desire, tried until he was exhausted.

“Mo Weiyu, you bastard,” he mumbled.

He turned his head away, but couldn’t escape the thoughts. It was almost as if that hot, firm body from Miaoyin Springs was right in front of him still—he could see the broad shoulders, the defined contours of his back, and the way the water had slid slowly down along his v-cut abs when he’d turned around...

He jolted up from the bed, face ashen, and dared not finish that thought.

He grabbed the first book his hand came into contact with like it was a lifeline.

How unfortunate for Chu Wanning, to have led such a respectable life only to now be reduced to having to resort to books to distract from his inner demons. He didn’t even know which book he had grabbed out of all the ones that Xue Meng had bought, but the pages were covered in densely-packed rows of tiny writing. Chu Wanning’s eyes glazed over the words without really taking anything in at first, and it wasn’t until a while later that he suddenly realized just what it was he was reading.

On that thin paper was written a very neat line of words:
“Size Ranking of the Cultivation World’s Young Heroes”

Chu Wanning knew the words individually, but they didn’t make very much sense together.

Young Heroes...Size...Ranking?

What size?

Height?

Reading further, there was a side note in small writing: This observational ranking is not a comprehensive listing due to the fact that some of the young heroes never bathe outside or visit the pleasure districts. The following individuals are missing from the ranking: Nangong Si and Xu Shuanglin of Rufeng Sect, Jiang Xi of Guyue’ye, Xue Meng, Xie Fengya, and Chu Wanning of Sisheng Peak...

“.....? ”

Chu Wanning blinked.

What was that supposed to mean? Surely their heights were pretty obvious even without bathing outside or going to the pleasure districts?

And there was even a passing mention of himself...

He furrowed his brows and put his finger on the list to keep track as he read on, only to choke at the very first name on the list.

Mo Weiyu.

Status: Gongzi of Sisheng Peak, Mo-zongshi

Chu Wanning thought briefly about Mo Ran’s figure. To be fair, he *had* gotten quite tall, but surely not so tall as to rank number one?

Reading on, it said: “Seen when bathing at Deyu Hall; an absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring.”

“.....”

Bathing at Deyu Hall...

Absolute unit...?

Something felt vaguely *off* to Chu Wanning, but he was really just too pure of mind, and couldn’t figure out why exactly it felt off even after dwelling on it for

quite a while, so he could only keep reading.

The person ranked second was a wandering cultivator he'd never heard of before, and written to the side was: "Seen when bathing in the forest; mighty."

"What even is this gibberish." Chu Wanning was a little put-off. "It's true that shoes and hairpieces could add to a person's height, but it wouldn't really be much of a difference, why go so far as to peek at people bathing? Why would this kind of trashy book would be so popular..."

Then he saw the third name——

Mei Hanxue

Status: Direct disciple of the Kunlun Taxue Palace sect leader

The text to the side was different this time; instead of "seen when bathing", it was: "Measured by one of Chunying Pavilion's girls and corroborated by a number of women from the cultivation world; Mei-gongzi's endowment could leave a lady so pliant that her body would be as water and her bones as mud, and could also readily do ten people a night."

Chu Wanning: "....."

A long moment passed in dead silence, then Yuheng Elder's head exploded into a droning buzz. Face red-hot and gaze flickering, he flung the booklet across the room with great vigor like it was a hot potato, beyond incensed.

What did he just read?

What size?! Even if he was dense, he wasn't *that* dense. What other size could it even *be*?! Filthy! Shameless! Indecent! Disgraceful!!!!!!

Still mad even after sitting in bed stiffly for a long while, Chu Wanning got out of bed and picked up the booklet just to explode it into a million tiny pieces with a pulse of spiritual energy from his fingertips...

But, like a glowing-hot branding iron, the words "absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring" had already been seared into his heart with a hiss, leaving his face flushed and his heart thundering.

He was a very proper, very upright person. Earlier at the Miaoyin Springs, he had very consciously kept his gaze up, without so much as a glance in the general direction of any place he wasn't supposed to look at, and besides, all that steam made everything so fuzzy that he wouldn't really have been able to see anything even if he had looked, anyway. But now this filthy book had managed to, in just a few words, paint the very image right in front of his eyes. And more than that, words often lent themselves even better to the vivid imaginations of the mind than pictures did.

Absolute unit...

Chu Wanning dragged his hands down his face, and then, after a long pause, grabbed the quilt and pulled it over his head.

It was only his first day out of seclusion, and he had already had the misfortune of suffering all *that*...Chu Wanning thought bitterly——the times sure had changed, he'd almost rather lie back down and go back to being dead!

But still, Yuheng Elder had always held himself to high standards, and so even though he barely got any sleep all night, and despite how aghast and unsettled he felt inside, he still got up on time the next day, got washed and neatly dressed, and then drifted gracefully down from the southern summit of Sisheng Peak with an expression that was nothing short of dignified and restrained.

Today was the day for the sect's monthly assessment. The Platform of Sin and Virtue glinted with flickering light reflected off the light armor worn by the

thousands of disciples going through their martial arts drills under the appraising gaze of the elders sitting at the high platforms above.

Though he had been gone for five whole years, Chu Wanning's seat was still right where it used to be, next to Xue Zhengyong, to the left.

He walked up the bluestone steps wearing white robes that dragged on the ground and a weary expression, took the empty seat with a sweep of those broad sleeves and then leisurely poured himself a cup of tea to sip on while watching.

Noting his sullen expression, Xue Zhengyong thought that Chu Wanning was mad over Mo Ran missing the banquet last night, so he leaned over and coaxed in a low voice, "Yuheng, Ran-er's back."

But contrary to expectation, all that earned him was a scowl twitching between Chu Wanning's brows and an even more sullen expression. "I know, I already saw him."

"Ah? Already saw him?" Xue Zhengyong nodded after a pause. "Great! So what do you think? He's changed quite a lot, eh?"

"Mn..."

Chu Wanning didn't exactly want to talk about Mo Ran, considering the fact that he had been cursed with the words "absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring" being repeated over and over and over in his head since yesterday, nor did he plan to look for Mo Ran in the sea of people below, so he looked down at the table.

"That's a lot of fruits and pastries."

Xue Zhengyong grinned. "You haven't had breakfast yet have you? Go ahead and eat up."

Not even bothering to hold back for decorum's sake, Chu Wanning picked up a lotus crisp^[3] to eat with his warm tea. The lotus crisp had a nice pink gradient from the base of the petals to the tips, with a filling of red bean paste inside the crisp, flaky layers that carried the refreshing sweetness of osmanthus flowers.

"These taste like the work of Lin'an's Breeze Bakery..." Chu Wanning murmured, then turned to Xue Zhengyong to ask, "They weren't made by Mengpo Hall?"

"Nope, Ran-er brought these back just for you," Xue Zhengyong replied with a grin. "See, the other elders didn't get any."

"....." Only then did Chu Wanning finally realize that the wooden table in front of himself was the only one that was laden with all sorts of fruits and snacks, from pastries to sugared desserts. There was even a small porcelain bowl the color of jade that, when he lifted the lid, turned out to be holding exactly three sweet tangyuan^[4].

Rather than the usual kind made with white glutinous rice, these tangyuan skins were mixed with the lotus root powder, a Lin'an specialty, so that they were clear and translucent, and the color of jade.

"Oh yeah, Ran-er borrowed the kitchen at Mengpo Hall this morning to make those. The red one's filling is rose and red bean paste, the yellow one is peanut sesame, and the green one's apparently got some fancy tea-based skin made with powdered Longjing tea. Interesting new things, these, too bad there isn't more..." Xue Zhengyong mumbled, "They're real fancy and all, but he spent all morning and only made the three."

Chu Wanning: “.....”

“Yuheng, is that enough for you to eat?”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning was quiet for a moment before nodding.

Actually, every time he ate tangyuan, he only ever ate three. The first was sweet, the second had a nice aftertaste, the third was enough, and a fourth would be too much.

It was a lucky coincidence that Mo Ran had just so happened to make exactly three, no more and no less, just the way he liked it.

Scooping up one of the adorably round lotus powder tangyuan in the porcelain spoon and holding it by his lips, Chu Wanning felt like it was just the right size too, perfect for eating in one bite, unlike the ones Mengpo Hall made for the Lantern Festival, which were so big that they stuck to his mouth and took quite some effort to chew.

The person who had made the tangyuan seemed to know exactly how much his mouth could hold, the exact size the food needed to be in order to fit comfortably in his mouth, and even the gooey filling seemed to be mixed with untold intimacy.

The thought made Chu Wanning’s heart flutter for some reason, right before it got squashed by shame and swept under a semblance of cool composure.

“He’s a pretty good chef.”

“Too bad he only made them for you, no one else gets any, not even this uncle of his.” Xue Zhengyong sighed ruefully.

Chu Wanning said nothing, only pressed his lips lightly together as he listened, stirring idly at the soup in the bowl with the spoon. The tangyuan were all gone by now, the perfect amount of sweetness spreading out slowly in his heart.

Once done with the food, Chu Wanning paid no mind to the spirited drills down below, opting instead to pick up a book from the table to read about the recent happenings at Sisheng Peak over the last five years.

These things were all managed by Xue Zhengyong, so they were simple and straight to the point, and Chu Wanning finished reading through it all in no time. He went to close the book, but then noticed another book under that one.

“What’s this...” He picked up the thread-bound book; it was very, very thick. Xue Zhengyong glanced over and said with a grin, “Another present from Ran-er. He was too embarrassed to give it to you personally ‘cause he accidentally got some blood on it while taking care of some fiends last night on his way home, and some pages got ripped too, so he asked me to put it on your table this morning.”

Chu Wanning nodded and flipped open the book, slender fingers trailing along the cover. On it was written, in a neat, straight script:

Dear Shizun.

His eyes opened fractionally wider in surprise.

Letters written to himself?

His heart suddenly felt like it had been singed by fire, hot and painful. He lifted his eyes to look for Mo Ran in the sea of people below, but saw only endless rows of glistening armor like light reflected off the scales of leaping fish.

Unable to find him, Chu Wanning could only turn back to the letters.

Mo Ran had missed his shizun for every single day of his seclusion. He had lots of things he wanted to say and worried that he wouldn't be able to remember it all, so he had a sturdy book made, a thick one with one thousand eight hundred and twenty five pages in total. For each day of the five years, he would write Shizun a letter about whatever happened, big or small, from the particularly gross-tasting leaf-wrapped sticky rice cake he had the misfortune of eating, to the insights he had gained from cultivation training that day, he wrote it all down.

He had originally planned it to have exactly one thousand eight hundred and twenty five pages, no more and no less, so that the day he finished writing the last page would be the day Shizun came out of seclusion.

But sometimes he couldn't stop writing, the words pouring out ardently in tiny handwriting squeezed onto the page, like it wanted nothing more than to show Chu Wanning the sea-buckthorn flowers of Outer Mongolia and the hazy fog surrounding Changbai Mountain as well, like it wanted nothing more than to tuck the delicious sweets tasted that day between the pages to share with Chu Wanning when he woke up.

The pages were lined with rows upon rows of the tiny writing. There was nothing too sentimental, nor did he include anything sad or upsetting, putting in writing only the happy, brilliant moments of the five years, setting down only the good to share with him.

And so the originally planned one page per day ran out, and he had to attach a thick stack of letters to the back of the book...

Chu Wanning flipped slowly through the book, his eyes a little wet.

He watched Mo Ran's handwriting go from childish to neat to elegant.

The ink on the most recent letter had not yet dried, while the earliest page had already turned yellow.

And on every letter, the words "Dear Shizun" were a little different. Slowly, gradually...from light and brisk to sure and steadfast.

Until, toward the end, it flowed like a painting yet could cut through metal, each confident stroke an art unto itself.

Flipping to the last page, Chu Wanning touched the words on the cover again.

Dear Shizun, Dear Shizun.

Looking at that neat handwriting, it was almost as if he could see the tip of Mo Ran's writing brush lifting from the paper, could see him setting it down before lifting his head, no longer the youth of the past.

From the first letter to the last, it was almost as if he could see Mo Ran growing up, from sixteen to twenty two, his figure becoming taller, his features growing defined.

And, every day without fail, he would sit down at the table and write a letter addressed to him.

"Shizun!!!"

Without him realizing, the drills had ended and there was someone calling for him. Chu Wanning looked up to see Xue Meng waving excitedly at him from the very front of the Platform of Sin and Virtue.

And next to Xue Meng, a tall man with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and a pair of long legs stood quietly, his face flushed from the drills and a sheen of sweat covering his forehead, sleek as a panther's coat under the sun.

Seeing that Chu Wanning was staring at him, Mo Ran paused and then broke into a smile. In the golden light of morning, his smile was bright and mesmerizing, like the gentle swaying of sun-bathed cypress. His eyes were filled

with warmth, his lashes were dipped in gentleness, and that strong, spirited face seemed a little bashful, so vibrant and fiery as to steal one's breath away.

How very handsome he was.

Keeping his expression carefully neutral, Chu Wanning crossed his arms where he was sitting on the high platform as he looked loftily down toward him. To anyone looking, he would appear cool and collected as usual, but little did they know that in truth, his thoughts were actually in utter chaos, his insides tied into a million knots of flustered panic.

Grinning amidst the crowd, Mo Ran suddenly lifted a hand and pointed at his own clothes, then at Chu Wanning.

"....." Not understanding, Chu Wanning narrowed his phoenix eyes and looked back at him in confusion.

Mo Ran grinned even wider, before cupping his hands around his lips and wordlessly mouthing something at him.

Chu Wanning: "?"

The morning breeze danced through gently rustling leaves. Mo Ran stifled an exasperated smile and shook his head, then tapped at the front of his own robes with a finger.

Chu Wanning looked down. A beat later, his ears suddenly turned red.

"....."

Under the guidance of his disciple, the esteemed and dignified Yuheng Elder finally realized that, this morning, in his hurry to get ready, and due to the mess of clothing heaped together at the Red Lotus Pavilion, he had unwittingly put on the robes he had accidentally "borrowed" from Mo Ran last night.

...No wonder it felt like there was something dragging on the ground behind him as he walked today! It was the hem of the robe!!!

Mo Weiyu, the nerve of you. Chu Wanning turned his face away in a huff. *You tactless bastard, why do you only ever say exactly what you shouldn't!*

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre: The Contents of Dog's Letter

If we speak of the ancients composing letters, "Letter to Yuanwei" alone is considered very grossly sentimental. I can't help but applaud Sir Bai Juyi and Sir Yuan Zhen's friendship, hahahaha.

Dog's letter isn't as sophisticated, and he won't know how to be as eloquent as Bai Juyi upon opening a scroll, like the sappy "Weizhi, Weizhi", or "our hearts as intimate as if they were bound together by glue". So what did Dog write?

"Selections from Dog's Letter"

The almond candy of Linyi is yummy but a little pricey half a kilogram costs forty copper coins but it is yummy yummy.

Pork stew with potatoes is very filling after one meal I won't get hungry during the night it is yummy yummy.

Accidentally mistook the honey in my qiankun pouch for oil and brushed it onto roasted chicken wings it is yummy yummy.

The fish grown in Quanzhou is really yummy, it is yummy yummy.

When Shizun wakes, let's eat these together!

Ch.132 Shizun and Shi Mei

>>dub/non-con flashback

In the evening, as the birds were returning to roost, so too did the disciples of Sisheng Peak make haste to Mengpo Hall after finishing their tasks for the day. Only Mo Ran stood still by the practice dummies, as if waiting for someone.

His relationship with Xue Meng had been much improved in recent years; there was much less animosity between them now, especially after Mo Ran had given him that top grade spiritual stone to be inset into his Longcheng blade. So Xue Meng turned to look toward him as he asked, "Aren't you coming to dinner?"

"Not yet."

Standing in the dusky light of the setting sun, Shi Mei was devastatingly beautiful, the afterglow making his skin look even fairer. Brushing back a strand of loose hair, he asked, "Is A-Ran waiting for Shizun?"

"Mhm." Mo Ran had already seen him at morning practice earlier, and when he had worked together with Xue Meng to repair the Heavenly Rift that year, he had noticed that Shi Mei was just about to outgrow Xue Meng back then too.

But still, in this moment, with the sun setting in the west, the sight of him standing in front of Xue Meng still felt strange to Mo Ran. Of course he didn't think that Shi Mei was bad-looking, it was just that...

He couldn't really put his finger on it. Mo Ran didn't know what kind of feeling it was, exactly; maybe he was just too used to the way Shi Mei's delicate figure had always been covered up behind Xue Meng before, so he'd never expected this kind of role reversal.

Mo Ran smiled at Shi Mei and said, "Since I missed the banquet yesterday, I wanted to invite Shizun for a meal down the mountain as an apology, so I won't be going to Mengpo Hall today. You guys are welcome to come too if you want."

Xue Meng and Shi Mei weren't used to eating together with Chu Wanning, so they looked at each other then left. Mo Ran had nothing else to do, so he crouched down on a large rock and plucked a foxtail grass to play with while waiting for Chu Wanning to come down the mountain.

The setting sun was already a dark crimson and the crescent moon was beginning to peek out from behind purple-red clouds when a person finally appeared on the bamboo footpath from the southern peak, walking slowly. That person had changed into a set of light robes in white, and was carrying a cloth bundle in hand. He paused for a beat upon seeing Mo Ran, and unease flashed briefly across his features.

"I was just about to go look for you for something...what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Shizun to have dinner together." Mo Ran jumped off the rock as he replied, still holding the foxtail grass and beaming brightly. "There's a new restaurant at Wuchang Town, and I heard they have a famous chef from the upper cultivation realm who makes really good pastries, so I wanted to invite Shizun to go try the place."

Chu Wanning looked him up and down mildly. "Not bad, got money to throw around now I see."

Mo Ran grinned and said nothing.

Chu Wanning hmph'd and tossed the cloth bundle at him. Catching it, Mo Ran asked, "What's this?"

"Your clothes," Chu Wanning replied as he walked past. Hurriedly catching up to walk side by side with him, Mo Ran said with a smile, "This robe's made of a pretty good fabric, light but warm. If Shizun likes it, I can have it altered down to be smaller and..."

"I don't wear secondhand clothes."

Mo Ran faltered before the embarrassment hit him. "That's not what I meant. I just...I saw Shizun wearing it this morning, so I thought Shizun liked it...that was thoughtless of me, I'll send someone to the store to have a new robe tailored."

Chu Wanning asked, "Do you even know what size I wear?"

Mo Ran thought to himself, how could he possibly not know Chu Wanning's size?

He could approximate the size of Chu Wanning's waist just by circling his arms, and he knew that if Chu Wanning stood on tiptoes, his chin would be at the height of his own shoulders. In the past, Chu Wanning couldn't help but bite him in the throes of passion sometimes, leaving two rows of teeth marks by his collarbone that wouldn't fade for days.

Of course he knew the length of Chu Wanning's legs as well, legs that were so powerful as they wrestled, but so helpless when wrapped around his waist, slim calf muscles quivering slightly, smoothly rounded toes tightly curled...

And how could he possibly not know the exact width of Chu Wanning's shoulders, the full, plump curvature of his buttocks.

Chu Wanning, for his part, was pure as untainted snow and had no idea what he had just asked, thinking only that he had stumped his good disciple Mo Weiyu with this brilliant query of his.

Chu Wanning said with a sweep of his sleeves, "And how are you going to tailor anything without knowing the size?"

"....."

Mo Ran had nothing to say for himself.

It's not like he could say that he did know, that his mind had kept drifting off to the way Chu Wanning's figure had looked yesterday while he was making tangyuan earlier, strong and toned and well proportioned even in the steamy air of the Miaoyin Springs, looking just as amazing as he remembered.

And that his mind had wandered to Chu Wanning's thin, lightly-colored lips, had thought about the way those lips had looked, stretched painfully around his own girth in the past as he'd been forced to swallow him, the spasming of his throat as he'd gagged.

Mo Ran had closed his eyes, the jut of his throat bobbing as he'd mentally condemned himself a beast.

Respect him, cherish him, don't have any more improper thoughts toward him.

Respect him...respect him...

Two deep breaths later, he'd managed to suppress the burning arousal, but the tangyuan had ended up a bit too big, Shizun would probably find them sticky when eating, so he'd thrown them out and remade them, three dainty little ones this time. Mo Ran held them between his fingers contemplatively for a while,

thought about those thin lips of Chu Wanning's parting slightly to take the sweet, sticky tangyuan into the soft warmth of his mouth...

And the curl of that tongue was like a searing flame, igniting all of Mo Ran's passions and desires, just about taking his life.

He even knew the exact size a sweet should be in order to fit into Chu Wanning's mouth, but Chu Wanning had actually asked him——asked if he knew what size clothing he wore.

The question lapped kittenishly at the inside of his chest.

Not daring to think any further, Mo Ran lowered his head and said, "Of course I'd ask Shizun for his size beforehand."

Finding it a little odd, Chu Wanning shot him a glance. "Did you catch a cold?"

"Nope."

"Then why is your voice so hoarse?"

"...Inflammation. [\[5\]](#)"

After a moment of blank staring, something seemed to occur to Chu Wanning, because he suddenly turned his face away, lips pressed into a thin line and gloom congregating between his brows, but the back of his ears were flushed pink.

The faint pinkness persisted all the way until they got to Wuchang Town and sat down in a room with a view inside the newly opened Zhongqiu Restaurant before finally fading away.

This was the first time Mo Ran had earnestly invited Chu Wanning out for a meal; although he'd done it before, those times had always been out of either necessity or exasperation, so the frame of mind was completely different.

The waiter steeped a pot of Lushan Mist and delivered some melon seeds and nuts before very respectfully taking out two menus written on bamboo scrolls to hand to the pair of cultivators from Sisheng Peak. Mo Ran flashed the waiter a smile as he took the scroll and said, "Thanks."

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes slightly to glance at Mo Ran.

This person never used to have a habit of saying thanks before.

"Shizun can feel free to order whatever he likes, but I recommend their sweet and sour mandarin fish with pine nuts, which I heard is both tasty and well-presented."

Chu Wanning nodded. "Then we'll get that. You pick the rest."

Mo Ran grinned. "I'll order according to Shizun's tastes then."

Chu Wanning said mildly, "You know what kind of food I like?"

"...Mhm, I do."

He'd always known, he'd just never bothered to remember before.

But from now on, he intended to never forget.

He was still looking at the bamboo scroll when the sound of footsteps came from the stairs, along with the tinkling of the bead curtain. Then he heard the waiter's voice saying, "Ah, right this way sir, the sirs you're looking for are in this room...yes yes yes, they haven't ordered wine yet."

The curtain of blue silk and agate beads was gently lifted by a smooth, fair-skinned hand.

A extraordinarily beautiful man with soft, inky black hair and a smile in his eyes that could chase the clouds from the sky appeared at the doorway carrying

a pot of wine. Mo Ran turned around and was visibly caught off guard before saying, “Shi Mei? What are you doing here?”

“I ran into the Sect Leader at Mengpo Hall. He heard that the two of you were eating out here and was concerned that this restaurant wouldn’t have aged wine since they’ve just opened, and so sent me to deliver a pot of pear blossom white to go with your meal.” Shi Mei swung the wine pot dangling from his hand as he spoke; the cutely stocky pot was made of red clay and held in twined bamboo rattan, and the wine could be heard swishing inside with the movement, its sweet fragrance just about noticeable even through the sealing clay.

Shi Mei said with a smile, “Good thing I made it in time; it would’ve been a wasted trip if you’d already ordered drinks.”

Chu Wanning asked, “What about you? Have you eaten yet?”

“I’ll eat when I get back, Mengpo Hall will be open for a while yet, I have time.”

“You’re already here, so just stay.” Chu Wanning was a courteous person. “Have a seat and eat with us.”

“Uh...I shouldn’t put A-Ran to the expense.”

Mo Ran smiled and said, “What expense, it’s just a matter of adding a chair.” He had the waiter bring out another set of bowls and chopsticks as he spoke. This Zhongqiu Restaurant really was quite fancy—even the chopsticks used in the private rooms had threads of gold and silver inlaid into the tips, glittering and sparkling in the candle light.

Shi Mei took a seat and poured wine in luminous cups^[6] for each of them, the rich aroma of the pear blossom white immediately permeating the air. It was a familiar scent; in the past life, Mo Ran had drunk it when Shi Mei had died, and again, all night on the rooftop, when Chu Wanning had died.

But they were both still alive now, and the calamity had already passed.

Mo Ran suddenly felt like all those things in the past, be it the possession or the affection, none of it really mattered anymore. What did matter was that the two best people in his life were still alive, and he could treat them to good food and good wine with the money he’d earned. This was enough.

These drinks shared were worth more than all the lands he’d owned in the past.

“Excuse me waiter, can we get an order each of mandarin fish with pine nuts, stewed crab meatball, pork trotter aspic, cherry ham, three delicacies soup, and steamed pork in bamboo leaf, all mild, and then poached fish in hot chili oil, mapo tofu, beef tripe in chili sauce, and kung pao chicken, as spicy as you make them. For dimsum we’ll have shrimp dumplings, steamed spareribs and taro with soy sauce, golden tripe with scallop, and chicken feet in soy sauce.^[7] And for dessert...” Mo Ran glanced at Chu Wanning and closed the menu. “We’ll have one of each.”

Without even looking up, Chu Wanning said, “We can’t finish all that.”

Mo Ran insisted, “We’ll just take the rest back.”

“It’ll get cold.”

“...We can have Mengpo Hall heat it up.”

Chu Wanning didn’t feel like wasting any more breath on him—Mo Ran was acting like one of those merchants that struck gold and got rich overnight, way

too extravagant—so he opened his own menu, looked it over, and said, “Just one order of kidney bean rolls, one order of leaf-wrapped sticky rice cake, and three bowls of tangyuan with sweet red bean paste filling, thank you.”

The dishes were quickly brought out one after the other. Shi Mei liked spicy food, Chu Wanning couldn’t take even a hint of spice, so Mo Ran arranged the dishes separately, with half the table being light and refreshing, the other half bright red and scrumptious, the colors complementing one another in a surprisingly appealing way.

“Here comes the last one, our signature dish, mandarin fish with pine nuts —”

With the waiter’s announcement, a plate of vibrantly colored and delicious-smelling mandarin fish in a thick stew was carried over by a pair of attendants. The fish looked like it weighed at least five catties, fried to a golden crisp and plated in an enormous, sky-blue porcelain dish. The fish was cut into flower-like slices of even thickness, with a thick, richly red sweet and sour sauce poured on top, and topped with a sprinkling of emerald peas, pieces of Yunnan ham, and translucent shrimp. Just the sight of the dish could make one’s eyes twinkle and mouth water.

Chu Wanning liked sweet things, especially sweet and sour things. Although his expression remained neutral as ever when the fish was brought out, even he couldn’t keep the twinkle from his eyes.

Mo Ran caught the twinkle.

The waiter glanced at the table, and seeing that there was some space in front of Shi Mei, went to rearrange the plates so as to make room for the fish there.

But a pair of hands faster than his beat him to rearranging the table. Standing up, Mo Ran moved a couple of the meat dishes that Chu Wanning wasn’t eating much from to his own side of the table, then put a few of the tasty and spicy dishes in front of Shi Mei, leaving an empty space in front of Chu Wanning. Mo Ran grinned at the waiter and said, “Go ahead and put the fish there.”

“Alrighty then!”

The waiter was all smiles, more than happy to have customers that would help make room on the table themselves, and immediately took the plate from the attendants to set down in the open spot before leaving with a bow.

The rearrangement had been done so naturally that anybody looking would only think that Mo Ran was just helping the waiter out, but Shi Mei had noticed the hidden bias. Somewhat surprised by the gesture, lights flickered across Shi Mei’s eyes for a long moment before he lowered them, looking a little upset.

Shi Mei felt that Mo Ran, having returned after being away for five years, not only looked completely different, but even the special attention that he once gave him seemed to have faded away a great deal.

He liked mandarin fish with pine nuts too, so why did Mo Ran put it so far away from him? Did he not know? Or...

Or did he no longer feel the way he used to.

Shi Mei well knew his own worth. His looks and his temper were both better than Chu Wanning’s; in fact, very few people in the entire cultivation world were even in his league in terms of looks.

But right now, he suddenly felt a little uncertain.

He knew that, despite Mo Ran’s fickle and flirtatious behavior in his youth, acting as if he cared only about pretty looks, in truth it was all an act, and that, to Mo Ran, the most precious thing was in fact the genuine sentiments beneath.

If someone were to give him a tael of copper, he would repay them with one thousand gold.

Now that the bitterness born of past misunderstandings between him and Shizun had been dispelled, Chu Wanning's kindness to Mo Ran was not something he could compare to. The thought brought a sudden chill to Shi Mei's heart, and he snapped his head up to look at the other two's faces under the candle light.

One was drinking wine with his head lowered and his expression mild, phoenix eyes molten as water, lashes soft as mist.

And the other was smiling as he watched the former, cheek propped up in one hand and eyes reflecting the candle light. The reflection of that light held the snow of early spring layered upon an open balcony, pear blossoms blooming under clear moonlight. And the fluttering of those eyelashes was as ripples spreading across the mirror surface of a lake, sweeping across glittering stars untold with feelings that were probably unknown to even the owner of the eyes himself.

In his moment of distraction, Shi Mei accidentally touched his chopsticks with his elbow, sending them clattering to the floor. He snapped out of it and bent down to pick them up with a muttered apology.

But then paused when he'd leaned over.

The chopsticks had landed right next to Mo Ran's boots, faintly reflective as they laid there quietly, waiting to be picked up.

He could've just asked the waiter for another pair, but Shi Mei never liked bothering others; or perhaps, faced with such a downfall, even the most mild-tempered and laid back person would feel a little bit unresigned, a little bit at a loss. Or maybe it was nothing so complicated—after all, a person's actions really were just a matter of a passing thought sometimes.

In this moment, the opportunity just so happened to present itself, and Shi Mei really did want to know just how much Mo Ran still even cared for him now...and so, after a few moments of hesitation, he made up his mind and lowered his head, reaching out with a fair, slender hand to go pick up the chopsticks by Mo Ran's feet.

The chopsticks had fallen too close, and it was completely natural and unavoidable that the back of Shi Mei's hand would brush against Mo Ran's lower leg as he retrieved them.

Author's Notes:

《When I'm Rich》

Mo Ran: Look at the main novel.

Chu Wan Ning: Impossible, I spend a lot on buying various materials for machines and mechanisms, I cannot possibly have much money.

Ye Wangxi: It is merely an external possession. As long as one has enough to use, it is adequate. Donate the rest.

Mei Hanxue: Buy accessories, woo chicks.

Nangong Si: Do you think that being wealthy makes you happy? None of you understand the pain of a rich person like me at all.

Xue Meng: When I'm rich, the first person I want to destroy is this dumb fool above. I am very willing to experience your pain, come, give me your vaults.

Ch.133 Shizun Has the Purest Mind

>>sex of the dubcon variety

Mo Ran was just taking a sip of the pear blossom white when he suddenly felt something brush against his leg. He instinctively tried to move his leg away, but the contact became even more evident before he could, practically pressing against him as it grazed past.

Caught off guard, for a moment he couldn't even process what had just happened, until Shi Mei sat back up, and he saw the light pink flush on that beautiful face, the way he had his lips pressed into a thin line and his brows lowered as if there was something on his mind. Only then did Mo Ran suddenly realize——

Just now, was that...?

Mo Ran choked and burst into a violent coughing fit.

In his mind, Shi Mei had always been as the untrodden snow in the spring, the new moon atop the branch, to be gazed upon appreciatively from a distance and not to be frivolously touched in any way. But although he loved Shi Mei to death, and in fact would happily die for him, he'd rarely ever had any dirty thoughts about him, much less did anything of the sort in real life.

Had this pure, untainted person just...felt him up?

The thought shocked Mo Ran to the core, and he shook like a rattle drum^[8], horrified. Chu Wanning noticed and asked with a frown, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!"

And right in front of Shizun too! ...Surely not?!

Th-that didn't seem like something Shi Mei would do...

Mo Ran's expression grew more complicated by the second; but rather than it being an awed surprise, it was more like an awful surprise.

After a long moment spent calming his nerves, he heard Shi Mei call out lightly, "Waiter, excuse me, these chopsticks got dirty, can I trouble you for a new pair?"

The waiter came as called and left to fetch a replacement. Mo Ran turned his head nervously, only to come face to face with Shi Mei's gentle, mild expression and the same calm gaze as always, as if he had imagined the bashful blush earlier. Sensing the eyes on him, Shi Mei lifted his own peach blossom eyes to look back at Mo Ran with a subtle, barely-there smile.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing."

Shi Mei said, "The chopsticks landed at an inconvenient place, right by your foot."

"Ohh..." Mo Ran let out a breath of relief as he felt his heart settle back into place. He was overthinking things after all. He was going to chitchat with Shi Mei some more to ease the atmosphere, but Shi Mei had already turned away and stood up to ladle out soup.

Still feeling rather bad about the misgivings he had just now, Mo Ran said, "Here, let me help."

"That's alright, I got it."

Shi Mei pulled back his sleeve as he spoke and calmly started ladling out the three delicacies soup for himself.

Mo Ran had put the soup there, close to Chu Wanning, far from Shi Mei. It had seemed okay enough at first while sitting, but now that he had to stand up to reach, it really became apparent just how far away the soup was from him—he practically had to stretch his arm all the way out just to reach it from the other side of the table.

One ladle, two ladles, slow and leisurely.

Mo Ran: "....."

Shi Mei said nothing when he met Mo Ran's uneasy gaze, only smiled slightly before looking back down to continue ladling out his soup.

Feeling a bit awkward, Mo Ran waited for Shi Mei to finish ladling, then asked Chu Wanning if he wanted the soup. Chu Wanning said no, so he moved it to the middle of the table, not too close or too far from anyone, just right.

His esteemed teacher and his favorite person.

There shouldn't have been any bias in the first place.

Partway through the meal, Shi Mei suddenly said, "A-Ran, you've really grown up a lot, and you're no longer that disciple who used to make Shizun angry all the time. So since we're all here today, there's something I want to tell you, and an apology I want to make to Shizun."

Seeing how serious Shi Mei was being, Mo Ran gave him his full attention. "What is it?"

"Do you remember the first time I brought you wontons?" Shi Mei said. "That bowl of wontons wasn't made by me, I never was any good at making those, it was..."

Mo Ran smiled. "Oh, that. And here I was worried it was something serious. I already knew, a long time ago."

"Ah, you already...?" Shi Mei's pretty eyes opened wide in surprise, then he turned to look at Chu Wanning, who was minding his own business drinking his wine. "Did Shizun tell you?"

"Nope, saw it for myself right before going to the Underworld." Mo Ran was just about to say more when Chu Wanning suddenly put down his wine cup, cleared his throat, and shot him a glance with a cool, stern expression.

Mo Ran knew that he had a thin face and didn't want others to know about his soft underbelly, so he said to Shi Mei, "Anyway, I found out about the whole thing five years ago already. It's kind of a long story, so let's not go into it."

Shi Mei nodded. "That's just as well." Then he turned to Chu Wanning to say, "Shizun, back then, when you didn't want to take the wontons to A-Ran yourself and had me do it instead, I didn't think much of it at first. But then, watching the misunderstanding between you two deepen over time, I felt terrible about it and was going to find an opportunity to clear it up with A-Ran, but every time I tried, the words never came out...I was being selfish, to be honest, because aside from the young master, A-Ran is my only close friend at Sisheng Peak, and I was afraid that he'd be unhappy if he found out, so..."

"It's fine, I did say not to tell him. You did nothing wrong."

"Still, I feel really bad about it, because it's like I took credit for Shizun's kindness. Shizun, I'm sorry." Shi Mei dropped his gaze as he spoke, and then a moment later, added, "A-Ran, I'm sorry as well."

Mo Ran had never blamed Shi Mei for that; even though his initial fondness for him was due to the mix-up with Chu Wanning's wontons, Shi Mei had also been genuinely good to him afterwards. Not to mention the fact that Shi Mei had only been doing what Chu Wanning had asked of him, not intentionally trying to take credit.

Mo Ran said in a hurry, "Nonono, don't worry about it, it's all in the past already anyway..."

He stared at Shi Mei in the light of the candle. It was a face he'd never seen before in the past life, because Shi Mei had already died by then, his life cut short, wilted before it could bloom, and became the sorrow of his lifetime.

He didn't even get the chance to find out that, ah, so this is what Shi Mei would've looked like if he'd lived to be twenty four.

Tall and slender, with a face that was fair as jade and a pair of warm peach blossom eyes that were clear and glistening, he looked so gentle that even his anger would probably be soft and mellow.

His tightly clenched heart relaxed by degrees and he secretly let out a sigh of relief, suddenly feeling very giddy, his heart feeling warm and settled.

Compared to Shi Mei when he was nineteen, this twenty four year old Shi Mei felt a little like a stranger, no longer so intimate and familiar as they used to be. Maybe this unfamiliarity was the very reason that a thought so ridiculous as "Shi Mei was feeling up his leg" would even pass his mind, but Mo Ran was sure that he'd get used to it in time...and, as for the matter of romantic sentiments, he didn't want to force it anymore—whatever happened would happen.

He had wandered about for five years, hardly leaving a trail the whole time, and still had a couple of close calls. He didn't know if the fake Gouchen had a hand in any of those incidents, but the fact was that the person behind it all had neither revealed themselves nor been caught. Mo Ran was sure that there would be trouble down the line, and he knew better than to let his guard down.

He was going to keep the two people beside him safe and sound, even if it cost him his life.

And so Mo Ran set his heart at ease for now, but little did he know that the inner demon never rests, turning to another as soon as it relented its grasp on him.

Maybe it was because of how much he had eaten at dinner, but Chu Wanning got sleepy soon after getting back. He had originally planned to work through the night to finish the blueprint for the new mechanism he was designing, but he only managed to get halfway through it before the yawns hit him. He tried to keep going for a while longer, but eventually gave in and, blinking sleepily, plonked into bed and passed out without even changing out of his clothes.

It was a hazy sleep, and he dreamed of all kinds of nonsense.

First it was that "Size Ranking of the Cultivation World's Young Heroes", then it was that firm, toned body he'd seen at the Miaoyin Springs.

In the dim light of the candle, Chu Wanning's brows twitched into a frown, as if trying to free himself from this shameless dream, only to inadvertently sink deeper into it instead...

And then, he had *that* dream again, the same one from before.

A Sisheng Peak that looked nothing like the one he knew, a Loyalty Hall that was and yet wasn't.

And a grown-up Mo Weiyu who was grasping him by the jaw, looking at him with venomous, mocking eyes as he said obscene things to him.

He said, "Let me fuck you and I'll agree to your terms."

This Mo Weiyu was a bit different from the Mo Ran he knew—his expression was too crazed, his handsome face was too pale, and his skin wasn't tanned the color of wheat.

"Get down on your knees... and suck me off..."

The disjointed words came in fragments from the depths of the nightmare, and it felt like there was something in his head that was just about to break apart, just about to break free of its chains and charge toward him.

He felt a chill run down his back, yet also for some reason felt inexplicably flustered.

In his dream, he watched as Mo Ran closed in on him and tore at his clothing, the sound of the fabric ripping clearer than it ever had been before. Then it all went black, like he was sinking into morasses.

The dream cut off there, the same way it had countless times before.

Except that, before, once the dream ended, he was able to sleep peacefully the rest of the night with no further disturbances. But today, for some reason, his vision gradually lit up again after that dream had ended.

Chu Wanning tried to see, but the new dream was so hazy it was like looking through a layer of mist. He couldn't quite see his surroundings, only that it was scarlet everywhere.

He couldn't see clearly, but his sense of smell and sense of touch gradually came back as the dream went on, became more acute than usual, even. He was suddenly assailed by an indescribably heated arousal, and he saw a toned body moving above himself, pressing down against him and rocking. Startled, Chu Wanning instinctively tried to struggle, but it was as if his body didn't belong to him at all, but to the him of the dream.

He could feel himself trembling, and he could hear the man's rough breathing, the hot puffs of breath against his ear, lips that kept brushing against the lobe of his ear time and again but did not kiss him there nor take his earlobe in to suck.

He turned his head; he was lying on a large, soft bed that creaked and rocked with their movements, and he could smell the musky scent of a beast pelt that seemed to be spread across the bed. He tried to reach out with a hand and grasp the bedcover amidst the vague fuzziness of it all, but didn't have the strength to move.

The man was so vicious, holding nothing back like he wanted to tear him apart. He heard a moan ripped from his own throat, hoarse and strangled.

He shook his head desperately, trying to struggle free, but that person had so much strength, as if he could crush him in his hand. Chu Wanning felt numbness spread across his scalp as his entire body shook uncontrollably...

Maybe it was because the dream had been too realistic and too draining, but Chu Wanning slept all the way until noon the next day before waking up, and then spent a long while just lying there in bed staring off into space. And when he turned his head, it was almost as if he could still smell the scent of the beast pelt from that dream, musky and sweet.

But then he blinked, and he was back in his black sandalwood bed in the Red Lotus Pavilion, and everything was perfectly fine, with nothing out of the ordinary.

Except...

Chu Wanning froze, then slowly looked down at himself.

"....."

Yuheng Elder, who rarely ever had any physical reactions after the years spent practicing asceticism due to his cultivation method, discovered that he actually... shamefully... had... morning... wood.....

Did all his years of ascetic training get eaten by a dog or something?!

And those dreams last night—what the hell was that? Why did he dream of such absurd things! How...how did it even happen?

Surely not from just seeing Mo Ran's body that one time at the Miaoyin Springs and then accidentally reading that trashy book with the "truly awe-inspiring" garbage?

Chu Wanning's entire face darkened. He buried his face in his hands and rubbed vigorously at it, but it was still just as dark when he looked back up.

.....

Just what was *wrong* with him?

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together and was just about to go have a soak in the cold lotus pond to cool himself off, but his toes hadn't even touched the ground when he felt a ripple in the barrier of the Red Lotus Pavilion.

He had a visitor.

Chu Wanning immediately paled and yanked the quilt over to cover up his lower half. That person walked fast too, probably using light footwork. He heard two knocks at the door.

"Shizun, are you up yet?"

The voice sounded just like the one in his dream, except the one in his dream had been deeper and throatier, steeped in a fervent, bottomless lust.

But the voice outside the door now was gentle and respectful, even a little worried, probably because of how late Chu Wanning had slept in.

The sound of that voice seemed to smash through the wall between dream and reality as Chu Wanning leaned against the bed, clutching the quilt to himself. The voice of that person outside brought back the entanglement in the dream and the intense motions one by one, rousing passions into turbulent tides, making it even harder for him to calm himself.

He was just about to lie back down and pretend to be sleeping when he heard Mo Ran say from the outside, "Shizun, are you in there? I'm coming in if you don't mind."

I'm coming in...

It was such a simple, normal phrase, but it made Chu Wanning think of the way that man had lain atop himself in the dream, lips closing and parting, the way that masculine body had felt so hot he was sure he was going to get burnt.

That person had said between pants, "Relax, I'm coming in."

Chu Wanning's face burned red-hot; he sat in bed in a daze with his clothes in a disheveled mess and a fire burning him up from the inside. There was ferocity and denial in his eyes, but they were like the gravel at the shoal, with sharp points that could ward people off in the bitter cold of winter, but once the snow melted in the spring and the tide rose, washing over the jagged edges with flowing, glimmering water, they no longer seemed half so threatening.

He'd rarely ever been so mortified and helpless, and had practically never felt such intense desire before.

Chu Wanning sat there in a dazed stupor, only snapping out of it when Mo Ran pushed the door open to come inside, but by then it was already far too late to feign sleep.

And so the sight that greeted Mo Ran when he walked in the door was that of Chu Wanning sitting in bed, the inky black hair draped loosely about him a sharp contrast against his face like the radiant surface of a frozen lake under the sun. His eyes and brows looked even more stern than usual, and when he lifted his eyes, the look that he directed his way was like the cold light reflected off the frosty edge of a blade drawn just a bit.

But there was a touch of red at the corners of his eyes, and so the cold light was tinged with allure and the ferocity was weaved with chagrin, as if he'd just suffered at someone's hands, had unspeakable things done to him, his eyes filled with indignation and a glassy hint of wetness.

Mo Ran's breathing abruptly slowed down as he stared wordlessly at Chu Wanning, this man who was like a tender bud growing out of a thorny thicket. He felt like a heavy rock had been dropped into his chest, sending waves splashing high...

Author's Notes:

Yesterday, an adorable cutie said that Shi-*meimei* picking up the chopstick was like Ximen Qing flirting with Pan Jinlian^[9], so the question is: is Shizun Granny Wang, or is he Wu Dalang?

Mini Theatre "How Atrocious Can The Title Of This Novel Get":

"Jinlian And His Dalang Shizun"

"I Fell In Love With My Little Wolfdog - Granny Chu's Autobiography"

"The Plum in The Golden Vase and Those Things That Happened Between Dalang and Jinlian"

"The reformed slutty wife Jin Buhuan"^[10]

"The Handsome and Charismatic Chu Dalang"

Ch.134 Shizun Sure Can Eat

Mo Ran said nothing for a long moment; only the jut at his throat bobbed slightly.

It was as if he was drowning in torrential desire, clinging desperately to a piece of driftwood to keep himself afloat as he thought in a stutter:

R-respect and cherish him.

Respect as in respect and cherish, cherish as in respect and cherish. Do not defile, do not harm, do not have any unnecessary feelings, and definitely do not do anything like those outrageous things he had done in the past life to humiliate Shizun.

The inside of his chest burning like hot lava, Mo Ran had to repeat the sentence in his head four, five times before finally gathering enough of his wits to

walk into the room with feigned composure and greet Chu Wanning with a smile.

“Shizun, so you were in after all...why didn't you say something?”

“Just woke up,” Chu Wanning replied dryly.

The dryness was no joke—his throat was dry, and his desire too, so much so that a single stray spark just might set off an uncontrollable blaze.

Mo Ran was holding a five-layered, heavy-looking bamboo meal box in his hands. He thought about putting it on the table, but one glance and he could see the mess of files, drills, mortise-tenon joint parts, nails, and all manners of blueprints scattered all over the tabletop. With no other option, he could only carry the box over to Chu Wanning's bed.

Chu Wanning seemed even more irritable than usual this morning, looking visibly agitated as he glanced at Mo Ran and snapped with a frown, “What do you want?”

“Shizun woke up pretty late. There's not much food left at Mengpo Hall now, and I had nothing else to do, so I made breakfast to share with Shizun.”

He opened the box as he spoke and began to take out its contents one by one. The topmost level held a plate of sauteed mushrooms, next was a plate of tender, stir-fried celtuce stem, then silk thread rolls and honey glazed sweet lotus root, and on the very bottom was two bowls of rice, each grain full and translucent, as well as a bowl of bamboo shoot and ham soup.



Two bowls of rice...

Chu Wanning was a little speechless—did Mo Ran really think that he was *this* much of a glutton?

“The table is a bit messy...does Shizun want to eat in bed, or should I clean the table up and move the food over?”

Of course Chu Wanning didn't like eating in bed, but the quilt was the only thing hiding his yet-to-subside arousal from view. He wavered between poise and dignity for a moment, then firmly chose the latter.

"There's too many things on the table, it'll take too long to clean up. Here is fine."

Mo Ran nodded with a smile. "Okay."

He really had to admit that Mo Ran was very skilled at cooking. He was already quite the good cook five years ago, and now, five years later, he was easily better than most ordinary chefs. Not only that, but Mo Ran also somehow knew his tastes very well—he knew that he didn't really like to eat congee in the morning, made sure to pick straw mushrooms for the mushroom dish, stuffed the silk thread rolls with sweet potato rather than bean paste, used only the tenderest tip portions of the bamboo shoots, and chose a cut of ham with a nice amount of fat, red and white interspersed like dusky clouds by the horizon...

Mo Ran had never asked him what he liked to eat, yet he had made everything just right, as if they'd already lived together for many years.

Chu Wanning was quite delighted with the food—he maintained his collected composure, but his chopsticks never stopped moving for even a moment. When he finished the last bit of the soup and looked up, he saw Mo Ran sitting at the edge of the bed with one foot on the cross bar of a chair next to the bed, cheek propped up in one hand as he watched him with a faint smile.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning subconsciously took out a handkerchief to wipe his mouth. "Is there something on my face..."

"Nope," Mo Ran said, "I'm just happy that Shizun liked the food."

"....." Feeling a little uneasy, Chu Wanning said in a mild tone, "It was good, but there was too much rice. One bowl will do, next time."

Mo Ran seemed like he was about to say something, but in the end decided not to, opting instead to grin at him, revealing a row of neat, pearly teeth. "Got it."

What a dummy, so careful and meticulous about serious things, but ridiculously careless when it came to the normal day-to-day things, completely not noticing that there were two pairs of chopsticks at the bottom of the box.

He ate two people's worth of food all by himself, then turned around to tell him that there was too much food, that he's a bit stuffed...

The more Mo Ran thought about it the funnier it became, until he couldn't help putting his hand to his brow and letting his eyelashes droop down as they quivered with laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing nothing." Mo Ran didn't want to embarrass him—his shizun valued his image above all else, after all—so he changed the subject to offer him an out. "Shizun, I just remembered something that I forgot to talk to you about yesterday."

"What is it?"

"On my way back, I heard that Great Master Huaizui left the day before you came out of seclusion."

"Mn, correct."

"So you didn't even see him after waking up, right?"

"I did not."

Mo Ran let out a sigh and said, "Then it's not a matter of Shizun being discourteous at all. I overheard people on the outside saying that Shizun didn't have any manners, that Great Master Huaizui had spent the last five years to bring Shizun back to life and didn't even get a thanks for his trouble. But the Great Master himself left first, and it'd be totally unreasonable to expect Shizun to run over to Wubei Temple as soon as he wakes up to kneel outside shedding tears of gratitude or something. Those mouthy people are really annoying, so now that we've cleared that up, I'll have Uncle address it at tomorrow's morning assembly——"

Chu Wanning suddenly interjected, "No need."

"Why not?"

"...The Great Master and I have long since burned our bridges," Chu Wanning said. "I wouldn't have thanked him even if he was still here when I woke up."

Mo Ran was taken aback for a moment. "How come? I know that Shizun chose to leave the temple of his own volition and had already severed his master-disciple relation with Great Master Huaizui then, but he still came to Shizun's rescue at his time of need, and..."

But Chu Wanning interrupted before he could finish. "Things between him and I are hard to explain, nor do I care to talk about them. If people want to call me a cold-blooded, ungrateful person with no conscience, then let them. It's only the truth."

Mo Ran fretted, "How is that the truth? You're clearly——you're clearly not that kind of person!"

Chu Wanning's head snapped up and his expression abruptly iced over, blood pouring like a dragon touched on its inverse scale^[11].

"Mo Ran," He said suddenly, "Just what do you even know about me?"

"I——"

He looked at Chu Wanning's bright eyes, at the frosty cold inside; here was a man who never let his guard down, who always kept his distance.

For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to disregard all consequences and say, I know, I know a lot of things about you, I understand, and even if there are some things from your past that I don't know about, I'm willing to listen, to share the burden with you. Don't just keep everything to yourself, under all those locks, behind all those walls. Aren't you tired? Isn't it hard for you?

But what right did he have to say any of that?

He was his disciple. Be not impetuous. Be not irreverent.

In the end, Mo Ran said nothing.

A moment passed in silence, and Chu Wanning's tense frame, taunt like a bowstring, finally began to relax by degrees. He sighed, as if drained, and said, "People are not saints, and little can be done against fate. There are certain things that can't be changed even if you want to. Never mind, don't bring up Master Huaizui to me anymore. You can leave, I'm going to change."

"...Yes." Mo Ran drooped his head and quietly collected the meal box. But just when he got to the door, he suddenly spoke up, "Shizun, you're not mad at me, are you?"

Chu Wanning shot him a glare. "Why would I be mad at you?"

Mo Ran beamed brightly. "That's good, that's good. Then can I come again tomorrow?"

"Suit yourself."

He paused before suddenly remembering something and adding, "In the future, there's no need to say things like 'I'm coming in' to me."

Mo Ran blinked. "Why not?"

"You're going to come in anyway! So what's the point in saying something like that?!" Chu Wanning was getting all worked up again, but whether it was at Mo Ran's untimely bout of purity or at his own uselessly reddened face was anyone's guess.

Chu Wanning didn't get out of bed until after Mo Ran had left, all confused. Not even bothering with shoes, he walked barefoot to the bookcase and took out a bamboo scroll, unrolled it, and stared at the words written there with an unreadable expression for a long, silent moment.

Huaizui had left the bamboo scroll at his pillow side before leaving. A spell on the scroll prevented anyone other than Chu Wanning from opening it. The writing on it was neat and straight, and read, "Confidential. For Chu-gongzi only".

His own teacher calling him Chu-gongzi.
Ridiculous.

The letter was neither too long nor too short. It went over some things that Chu Wanning should be mindful of after waking up, before going into great length "entreating" him for one thing.

Great Master Huaizui asked that he absolutely go to meet him at Longxue^[12] Mountain near Wubei Temple after he has recovered. He had written, in earnest terms, that he was getting on in years and would not be long for the world, that he felt immense guilt over certain things of the past.

"This old monk hopes to speak with you before his passing. You still carry that old injury, and hearing that the adverse effects of the injury cause you to have to go into seclusion for ten days every seven years, this old monk feels truly remorseful. If you would be willing to come to Longxue Mountain, it can be healed. However, the healing spell is quite risky, so you must also bring along a disciple of dual wood and fire elemental to stabilize the array."

Old injury... Longxue Mountain...

Brows furrowed deep, Chu Wanning's fingers nearly dug into his palm.

Healed? *How?* How could something that has been destroyed, been lost, and those one hundred sixty four days spent at Longxue Mountain, how could any of that ever be recovered?

Just how masterly did Huaizui think he was, that he could level out a scar this deep?!

His eyes snapped open as golden light cracked in his palm, the letter written on sturdy Xiangfei bamboo shattering instantly into powder in his hand and scattering away into the air.

Never again would he set so much as a single foot into Wubei Temple for as long as he lived.

Nor would he refer to Huaizui as Shizun ever again.

In the blink of an eye, it was already the fourth day since Chu Wanning came out of seclusion. Xue Zhengyong had called him to Loyalty Hall on this day and

handed him a letter of commission. He shook open the letter and read the few simple lines written on it.

Chu Wanning lifted his gaze and said, "I think you gave me the wrong one."

"Huh?" Xue Zhengyong took the letter and read over it again himself, then replied, "Nope, this is the one."

"....." Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. "It says to help with the farming at Yuliang^[13] Village."

"Do you not know how?"

"....."

Xue Zhengyong's eyes went wide. "Wait, you seriously don't know how?!"

Backed into a corner by the string of questions, Chu Wanning seethed. "Isn't there anything more normal, putting down demons and whatnot?"

Xue Zhengyong said, "Y'know, things have been pretty peaceful lately, so there actually *aren't* any places being troubled by demons right now. Aiyah it'll be fine, Ran-er's going with you anyway, you can just sit to the side and take it easy while he does all the hard work if you want, harvesting some rice and threshing some millet's no big deal to the young and spry anyway."

Chu Wanning's inky black brows were furrowed so deep. "Since when did Sisheng Peak start taking odd jobs like these?"

"...Since always? Like when Granny Wang's cat gets stuck in a tree at Wuchang Town and Shi Mei goes to get it down. It's just that there were usually more hard-to-handle issues before, so I never bothered you with any of the simpler ones," Xue Zhengyong said. "Besides, didn't you only just wake up? I was actually gonna send someone else, but I thought you'd be bored just sitting around."

"But even then I don't...want to harvest rice." Chu Wanning narrowly avoided blurting out that he "didn't know how to harvest rice".

Xue Zhengyong insisted, "Like I said, Ran-er will be there to help you out, so just take it as a leisure trip to relax and stroll around a bit."

"Can I not relax and stroll around just fine without taking an assignment?"

"I mean, I guess." Xue Zhengyong scratched his head. "But Yuliang Village is pretty close to Butterfly Town, with that Heavenly Rift that Ran-er patched up last time. He's not you, after all, so why don't you check on it while you're there and see if there's any parts that need reinforcing?"

Only then did Chu Wanning finally see a need for him to go, so he took the letter without another word and turned to leave Loyalty Hall.

Author's Notes:

Congratulations, players, you have entered the new instance dungeon "If I Can't Blueball You To Death, Consider It My Defeat".

Dog and Shizun are about to embark on an instance dungeon of unprecedented low difficulty, and the wingwoman^[14] is about to come online to

deal this dumb dog the final blow, so that he can accelerate his revelation of what love is, ah, fuck!! Die of stupidity, I don't care!!!

I will maintain my principle of "If I can't blueball you little vixens to death, I'll perform 'swallowing a bite of durian' on the spot". In this raid, there's no actual smut, but I'm driving fake cars all around; hope everyone's happy reading the fake smut~ hahaha~

Ch.135 Shizun Learns Sneakily

Yuliang Village was a tiny village, and most of its villagers were on the older side, with very few young people, so every year when it got to be the busy season in farming, they would ask the cultivators at Sisheng Peak for help.

Some request like this, that has absolutely nothing to do with cultivation, would've gone totally ignored at any other sect, but Xue Zhengyong and his older brother had started Sisheng Peak from scratch, and had gone through their share of hardships when they were young—rumor had it that, growing up, they had to rely on charity to fill their stomach^[15]. Thus, not only did he not have it in himself to refuse such requests from the old tenant farmers, he would take them very seriously, sending disciples to properly fulfill the requests each and every time.

The village wasn't exactly far from Sisheng Peak, but neither was it close, a middling distance that would be too inconvenient to walk and too pretentious to ride a carriage for.

So Xue Zhengyong had two good horses prepared for them. It was late autumn, the foliage were turning their fall colors, and when Chu Wanning came down the stairs to the main gate, the sight that greeted him was that of Mo Ran standing beneath a tall maple tree, its bright red, frost-adorned leaves rustling in the wind like the sheen of fine brocade, like the splashing of red carps.

Mo Ran had the reins of a black horse in hand while a white horse nuzzled his cheek, and was in the middle of teasing them with a tuft of alfalfa flowers when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. A few pieces of red leaves fluttered down just as he turned to look over his shoulder, beaming brightly up from between dancing leaves.

"Shizun."

Chu Wanning's footsteps slowed, then came to a stop on the last couple of steps.

Sunlight filtered through the luxuriant leaves to fall on the moss-covered stone steps. He stared at the man standing there, not far away; maybe because they were setting off to do farm work, but Mo Ran wasn't wearing Sisheng Peak's disciple uniform today, nor was he wearing those white robes from when he first got back.

Instead, he had on a set of black raiments with wrapped wristguards, a simple getup that accentuated his slim waist, long legs, and broad shoulders. It was a good figure, especially around the torso area, where the open collar revealed a firm, toned chest the color of honey, rising and falling with each breath.

If Xue Meng's getup with the sparkling silver armor was showy like a peacock fanning its tail feathers, then this look of Mo Ran's was sultry, an innocent kind of sultry, an unmeaning kind of sultry—that was to say, it gave off an air of "I'm a decent, honest person, I've never teased or provoked in my life, and the only thing I know is honest hard work."

"....." Chu Wanning looked him up and down several times before opening his mouth to say, "Mo Ran."

"Hm? What is it, Shizun?" The strapping young man replied with a smile.

Chu Wanning's face was deadpan. "Aren't you cold, with your collars open that wide?"

After the initial surprise had passed, Mo Ran came to the conclusion that Shizun was expressing concern for himself and felt all giddy about it. He put the alfalfa back into the hay basket for the horses, dusted his hands off, and bounded up the bluestone steps to stand charmingly in front of Chu Wanning, and then to proceeded to grab Chu Wanning by the wrist before he could even react.

"Not cold at all, I'm actually kinda hot right now from rushing about all morning." He grinned guilelessly as he pressed Chu Wanning's hand against his own chest. "See, Shizun?"

It felt scalding.

The young man's chest was hot to the touch, and together with that strong heartbeat and that pair of star-bright eyes, Chu Wanning could feel his entire back going numb. He hurriedly ripped his hand away as his face sank.

"Indecent."

"Ah...is it sweaty?" But Mo Ran misunderstood. As things stood, he thought that Chu Wanning wasn't into men—their entanglement in the past life had all been due to his own unreasonable coercion, after all—so he didn't think that Chu Wanning would have any interest in himself, thus Shizun must be annoyed at his sweatiness.

Remembering Chu Wanning's love of cleanliness and dislike of touching people, Mo Ran felt embarrassed, scratching his head as he said, "That was thoughtless of me..."

If he had looked closely, he would've seen the blush at the base of Chu Wanning's elegant neck, and the glimmer of affection beneath those coolly drooped lashes.

But he had missed that singular instant of opening, and Chu Wanning wasn't going to give him another. His snow white shoes walked down the slippery bluestone steps, headed directly for the black horse, mounting it in a single graceful motion that was smooth as flowing waters.

With the sunlight illuminating the land and red autumn leaves as far as the eye could see, the white-robed man sitting atop the large black horse glanced down over his shoulder at the disciple of his standing on the ground, his face like cool jade giving off an air of loftiness, ever the sharp and handsome Yuheng Elder.

"I'm off. Keep up."

And with that, those long legs clamped about the horse and it set off in a gallop.

Mo Ran stood rooted to the ground in a daze for a while, then picked up the bamboo basket, still half-full with the alfalfa flowers he was in the middle of feeding the horses with, and tied it to the white horse's saddle before leaping up himself, caught between laughter and tears. "But Shizun, the black horse is mine, don't just... Shizun! Wait for me!"

Galloping on swift horses, they arrived at Yuliang Village within the hour.

A few hectares of rice paddies^[16] stretched out along the outside of the village, waves rolling through the fields of golden grain in the breeze. Some thirty-odd farmers were toiling away in the paddies. Due to the shortage of hands, everybody, young and old alike, were working the fields, backs bent low and trouser legs rolled up as they swung their sickles, large beads of sweat dripping off their faces with the exertion.

Mo Ran immediately went to find the village chief and hand him the letter, then changed into a pair of hemp shoes and headed for the fields without further ado. He had plenty of strength and stamina both, and was a cultivator to boot, so something like reaping crops was nothing to him, and it only took him less than half the day to harvest two whole rows of rice.

With the golden ears of rice piling up on the side of the paddy fields, soaking up the sunlight, the sweet scent of grains wafted through the air. The rustling sound of the farmers' sickles could be heard throughout the plateaus, and sitting at the ridge between the paddy fields, a maiden leisurely sang a farming song as she gathered the grains.

"The sun setting behind a mountain shines like a red flower, painting all four mountains red oh~ red like peonies. A red fan to sing my love song, a hydrangea to ask my loverboy, I tug at loverboy's belt, just when are you coming? Today I have no time, tomorrow I have to chop firewood, the day after I can come over."

The farmer girl casually sang these coy lyrics in that soft little tune, the words drifting in the air, landing in the listeners' hearts.

"Today—I have no time, tomorrow I have to chop firewood, the day after—I can come over."

Chu Wanning did not go to work in the fields, sitting under a tree drinking from a jar of hot water instead. His eyes followed that black-clothed, hard-working silhouette in the distance as he listened to the song, his thoughts all over the place, so much so that the water he swallowed seemed to flow into his chest rather than his stomach, making it feel all hot.

"What an obscene song," he commented coldly when he finished the water, then went to return the ceramic jar to the village chief.

The village chief stared at him with hesitation.
Chu Wanning asked irritably, "What is it?"

"...Is xianjun...not going to work the fields?" The old village chief was a straightforward kind of person, and answered the question he was asked in a shaky, wizened voice, white beard trembling and white brows creased. "Is xianjun...just here to oversee things?"

"....."

Chu Wanning had never felt this put on the spot before in his life.
Work the fields...

Didn't Xue Zhengyong say he could just sit on the side and watch Mo Ran do all the work? Does he actually have to work too?
...But he didn't know how!!!

But the old village chief was staring at him like he still had more to say, and even the couple of little kids and old women nearby heard the exchange and looked up to stare at this immaculately dressed man.

Children hold nothing back, and a little kid with his hair in buns asked crisply, "Granny granny, this dao Zhang-gege is wearing all white, how is he going to do any work in the fields?"

"His sleeves are so wide..." Another kid murmured.

“And his shoes are so clean...”

Chu Wanning was on pins and needles with how awkward he felt. He stood there for a bit, but his thin face really couldn't keep lounging around after that, so he grabbed a sickle and waded into the paddy field without even taking his shoes off, the slippery, muddy swamp clinging to his feet immediately and the sitting water coming up past his ankles. Chu Wanning gingerly took two steps, frowning at the slippery feeling, then tried swinging the sickle a couple of times, but it was fumbling at best, as he knew nothing of the technique.

“...Pfft, this dao Zhang-gege sure is clumsy.” A pair of little kids had seen his attempts from under the mulberry tree, laughing at him with their cheeks propped up in their hands.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Face darkening and not wanting to be near these people for even a moment longer, Chu Wanning summoned all the poise he had in him to keep his handsome face straight and his pace calm and steady as he waded through the mud in great big strides toward the figure that was busily cutting rice in the distance.

He was going to go sneakily observe how Mo Ran was doing it.

The saying went that one could always learn from others; he was going to learn it sneakily.

When it came to farming, Mo Ran was clearly more skilled than Chu Wanning. He was bent over under the blazing sun, each swing of his sickle reaping clumps of golden rice that fell softly and obediently into his waiting embrace, which he held with one arm until he'd gathered a large armful before tossing into the bamboo basket behind him.

He was so absorbed in the task that he didn't even notice Chu Wanning's approach, eyelashes drooped gently down as he continued to work diligently, a vague shadow cast by his straight nose as a bead of sweat trickled down the side of his cheek. There was a feral kind of scent coming from his body, scorching yet wild, muted yet fervent. Under the sunlight, his skin was like red-hot steel, as if having just come out of the casting pool, still crackling with sparks and hissing with steam with how blindingly bright it seemed, how beautifully brilliant.

Standing a distance away but not too close, Chu Wanning appreciated the view for a while before abruptly realizing just what it was he was doing. He furrowed his brows, shook his head, and mumbled something, then continued wading forward with a straight face.

He was going to learn, sneakily!

He was here to see just how Mo Ran was holding the sickle and just what kind of angle he was swinging it at, to find out why the rice that was stiff as iron wires in his own hands were pliant as boneless maidens in Mo Ran's, falling so willingly and eagerly into his arms.

Chu Wanning was so focused on staring that he didn't even notice the frog by his foot until it leaped up with a loud “*Ribbit!*” and hopped off toward the ridge.

Caught by surprise, Chu Wanning hurriedly pulled his leg back, but the paddy field was too slippery and he was too unprepared, and so it was that the great Yuheng Elder tipped forward, on track for a direct faceplant into the muddy paddy field, all because of a single brazen frog!

Woosh!

With his face just about to meet the mud, Chu Wanning had no time to cast anything, and could only reflexively reach out to grab at the hard-working person in front.

The village maiden's singing sounded even more coy. *"I tug at loverboy's belt —just when are you coming—"*

As his luck would have it, Chu Wanning ended up grabbing onto Mo Ran's belt and stumbling forward a few steps, before falling against a broad chest that was hot to the touch and smelled of masculine musk and finding himself wrapped in a pair of strong, solid arms.

Author's Notes:

Wingwoman: I've already come online in this chapter, really.

Mo Ran: ...Erm...are you that frog?

Wingwoman: Goodbye.

T/N meatbun? Hewwo? Is this an abo? Be straight with us Is This An A/B/O,,,,,,

Ch.136 Shizun, Relax

>>noncon mention

Mo Ran was minding his own business reaping rice when he suddenly felt a hand from behind pulling his belt down. Quite the shocking feeling, really.

Turning around to see that it was Chu Wanning, who was about to fall over, was even more shocking.

Mo Ran hurriedly threw the sickle aside to support him, but it was such a bad fall that Chu Wanning was practically already halfway on the ground, and a hand in support wouldn't help any, so he had no choice but to hold him up with both arms. That person dressed in floating white robes and smelling faintly of the fragrance of haitang blossoms landed solidly against his chest, and Mo Ran reflexively closed his arms around him in an embrace, the ears of rice previously occupying his arms scattering all over the ground.

"Shizun, what are you doing here?" He asked, not yet recovered from the shock. "You scared me."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"The paddy field is slippery to walk in, be careful."

The person in his arms didn't look up or say anything, feeling so awkward that he couldn't even form any words. But the village maiden continued warbling mercilessly, *"I tug at~ loverboy's belt~ hey~ just when are you coming~"*

As if struck by lightning, Chu Wanning abruptly let go of Mo Ran's belt and stood back up on his own feet. He took a breath before suddenly shoving Mo

Ran away, and although his expression might pass for calm, his eyes were frightfully bright, like rolling waves catching the sunlight, obviously flustered but still forcefully faking composure.

“.....” Mo Ran suddenly noticed that his earlobes were red.

It was a pretty color, a light pinkness in the skin like tender peaches at the tips of branches. He suddenly thought of the way those earlobes had tasted in his mouth as he sucked on them in the previous lifetime, the way Chu Wanning had trembled slightly every time he had done that, the way that, despite the utmost unwillingness, his steel-boned body had gone soft and pliant in his arms.

Mo Ran swallowed, his gaze unconsciously growing deep and dark...

But Chu Wanning was absolutely livid—though it was uncertain whom at—snarling between gritted teeth, “What are you staring for! What is there to look at!!”

Jolting back to reality, Mo Ran’s blood ran cold.

Beast!

Just what despicable things had he done to Shizun out of his own selfish desire in the past? Shizun was so proud, how could he possibly accept being taken like that? Not only that, but such a dispassionate person as him probably didn’t even feel any desire whatsoever to start with, so how dare he even think about these deplorable things again!

Mo Ran shook his head over and over again like a rattle drum.

Chu Wanning snapped, “What are you shaking your head for! Having fun?!”

“.....” Mo Ran immediately stopped shaking his head, but secretly snuck a glance.

Chu Wanning was clearly embarrassed, but trying to cover it up with this mask called anger as he was wont to do. Now that he was looking closely, it really wasn’t difficult to tell from his eyes.

He was probably just embarrassed that he had tripped over in front of his own disciple, and due to a ribbiting frog at that.

How cute.

Mo Ran couldn’t help chuckling at the thought.

But the chuckling only made Chu Wanning even angrier, his brows slanting in fury as he flew into a rage. “What are you laughing at?! So what if I don’t know how to do farming things, what’s so funny about that!!”

“Nothing, nothing funny, nope.” Mo Ran coaxed as he tucked his smile away and straightened his face into a serious expression, though he couldn’t hide the smile in his eyes, bright and shining with amusement.

After a few moments of holding in his laughter, and just as it seemed like this matter was about to be dismissed, the frog that had hopped over to the ridge between the paddy fields puffed out its cheeks and croaked out two more self-righteous ribbits, as if in a show of force.

Mo Ran fumbled his self-control, tried to turn his face away and cough into his fist to cover it up.

But he fumbled that too, and let out a “pfft” of laughter.

“.....” Chu Wanning was really going to lose it, dragging his muddled robes behind him as he made for the ridge in a rage, but then he heard Mo Ran call out for him.

There was hardly any distance between the two of them; normally, Mo Ran would’ve just reached out and grabbed him—but he didn’t, because he could still feel Chu Wanning’s warmth against his chest, could still smell the scent of haitang from Chu Wanning’s robes.

His heart felt all mushy like it was about to melt.

But he didn't dare allow his heart to melt. This person in front of him was so good, he wanted to treasure him, to cherish him, to revere him as he would a god. He didn't want to hurt him any more with his own vulgarity.

So he only called out to him, "Shizun."

"What, not done laughing yet?" Chu Wanning glared at him out of the corners of his eyes.

Mo Ran's dimples were filled not with mocking, but gentleness. "Do you want to try learning? I'll teach you, it's actually quite simple, and Shizun is so smart, you'll definitely pick it right up."

As Mo Ran personally taught him how to reap the rice, Chu Wanning couldn't help wondering just how things managed to turn out this way—he had come over with the intention of learning by covert observation, so how had he ended up in an official apprenticeship instead?

What a mess.

But Mo Ran was taking it so seriously and attentively, and didn't even laugh at his clumsy attempts.

His brows were inky-black, and his features were sharper and more defined than when he was younger. These looks would usually seem handsome yet arrogant, but his gaze was gentle and patient, as if hiding a great many things that weighed on him, or perhaps hiding nothing at all, only conveying the depth of tenderness, the weight of the years.

"Just like this, it's all in the wrist, get it?"

"...Mn."

Chu Wanning tried doing it the way he instructed, but still didn't quite get it right. He was used to working with stiff blocks of wood and whatnot in his work, but these soft ears of grain were somehow harder to deal with.

Mo Ran watched from the side for a while, then reached out with a toned, muscular arm, and adjusted his grip on the sickle.

Skin contacted skin for only an instant; Mo Ran didn't dare touch him more than that, nor did Chu Wanning dare allow him to touch himself more than that.

One was clearly a torrential stream that had nowhere to pour, and the other clearly a pond that was all but dried up. They were clearly a perfect match—if only he would go into him, he would no longer churn restlessly with no outlet, and he could be filled and watered, parched cracks all mended.

But they just wouldn't, each hiding from the other.

He instructed from behind him, "Put your finger a little lower, careful not to cut yourself."

"I know." Came the stiff response.

"Relax a little, don't be so tense."

"....."

"Relax."

But the more Mo Ran said that, the more Chu Wanning's back tensed and his grip stiffened.

Relax relax relax, it's not like he didn't want to! Easy for him to say! But Mo Ran was hovering right next to him as he spoke, his breath practically caressing the back of his ear, hot and heavy, carrying this man's unique scent of wildness—*how was he supposed to relax like this?!*

For some unknown reason, his brain chose this exact moment to remember that shameful dream.

They had been in more or less the same position in that dream, with Mo Ran's lips by his ear, touching yet not, ghosting along his earlobe.

He had said between panting breaths, "Relax a little...don't clench around me so tight..."

Chu Wanning's entire face turned red.

He tried his best to get away from these weird thoughts, but a second wave rolled in right on the heels of the first, and he struggled free of these thoughts only to recall that "Size Ranking of the Cultivation World's Young Heroes" booklet instead...

"....."

Chu Wanning was afraid that there might be smoke rising from his head.

But Mo Ran was none the wiser. "Why are you so tense? Re——"

"I am *quite* relaxed!" Chu Wanning whipped his head around, eyes a little watery yet also filled with flames of anger as he glared at him, so close that it was practically like a sword piercing directly through Mo Ran's heart.

Both their hearts were clearly drumming fast in their chests, but however loud the drumming, the other still could not hear, not unless he were to step closer, not unless he were to press his chest against his back, not unless he were to grab his hand, bite his ear, suck on his earlobe, murmur to him between heavy breaths, "Relax, don't be so nervous." Only in this way would they understand each other.

But Mo Ran would never, and neither would Chu Wanning.

So Mo Ran awkwardly drew his hand back and straightened back up sheepishly, saying, "...Then, does Shizun want to try again like this?"

"Mn."

Mo Ran flashed him another smile before picking up his own sickle and getting back to work not far away. Two slices later, he seemed to suddenly remember something, turning to say over his shoulder, "Shizun."

"What?" Chu Wanning's expression was sullen.

Mo Ran pointed at his shoes. "You should take off your boots."

"I will not."

"You might slip wearing them," Mo Ran said earnestly. "Those boots have smooth soles, I won't always be there to catch you every time you slip."

"....." Chu Wanning mulled it over gloomily, then walked over to the ridge and took off his shoes and socks, tossing them next to a haystack before walking barefooted back into the paddy field to slog away at the rice.

High noon, and Chu Wanning had finally become more or less proficient with the sickle, his motions growing more fluent. The rice that he and Mo Ran reaped piled into quite a mighty little golden-colored mountain.

After harvesting another batch of crops in one go, Chu Wanning finally felt a little tired, straightening up to take a deep breath and wipe his sweat with the corner of a sleeve. A light breeze swept past golden waves of grain, bringing with it a refreshing autumn chill. He sneezed, and Mo Ran turned around immediately in concern.

"Is it cold?"

"I'm fine." Chu Wanning shook his head. "Some dust got in my nose just now."

Mo Ran smiled and was just about to say something when the clear voice of a village maiden rang out from beneath the mulberry tree in the distance, hands cupped around her mouth as she shouted “Lunchtime—it’s lunchtime——!”

“It’s the lady who was singing earlier,” Chu Wanning commented without even turning to look.

Mo Ran turned to the side and lifted a hand to his brow to squint into the distance. “It really is her. Shizun can tell by voice?”

“Mn, all that warbling just to announce mealtime, who else could it be.” Chu Wanning brought the last basket of rice over to the pile as he spoke, then headed off toward the mulberry tree, not even bothering with shoes since his feet were already dirty anyway. Mo Ran shook his head with a smile, picking up his abandoned boots before running to catch up.

Food was cooked in large pots for the entire village, and four or five women of the village carried out three wooden barrels and opening them to reveal a barrellful of steaming rice, another of braised pork with cabbage, and the last one filled with tofu and vegetable soup.

Honestly speaking, life for the common folk in the lower cultivation realm wasn’t exactly the greatest, and meat was considered a luxury to most people. But Sisheng Peak’s cultivators were here, and what kind of host would the village chief be if he fed them nothing but vegetables? And so there was a hearty portion of cured marbled meat in the pork and cabbage dish.

The moment the lids came off, all the big burly villagers, smelling the meat, had to swallow their drool.

“It’s not much, xianjun please make do.” The village chief’s wife was a stocky woman, fifty-something years old with a loud voice and a wide, unreserved grin. “We cured the meat and picked the vegetables ourselves, hope ya don’t mind.”

Mo Ran waved his hand in a hurry. “Of course not.” He scooped two full bowls of rice and handed them to Shizun before getting a third bowl himself.

Peeking into the barrel, Chu Wanning saw that the braised pork with cabbage was covered in a whole layer of chili peppers. He was rather apprehensive at the sight, but the auntie waved him over with such enthusiasm before scooping a big ladle-full of hot, spicy broth and putting many pieces of bright red meat in his bowl.

“.....” It would’ve been a delicious treat to the people of Shu who loved spicy foods. But to Chu Wanning, this bowl just might be the end of him.

But it wasn’t like he could decline the hospitality of the villagers, either. Chu Wanning was frozen in uncertainty when a hand reached over and offered him another bowl.

The bowl was filled with tofu and vegetable soup. It was kind of plain, but Chu Wanning liked it.

“Here, swap with me,” said Mo Ran.

“...It’s fine, eat your own.” Chu Wanning did not take the proffered bowl.

The auntie was puzzled for a while by this exchange before she put two and two together and smacked her head, hollering, “Aiyah, can this xianjun not eat spicy food?”

Seeing the guilt on her face, Chu Wanning replied, “No, I can eat it a little.” Then he picked up some of the broth-soaked rice with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth.

“.....”

A few moments passed in silence, Chu Wanning's face growing redder by the second as everyone watched, and then even the tightly-pursed line of lips began to quiver, until——

“...Cough cough cough cough!!!!”

An earthshaking coughing fit.
Who was it that said the only unbearable things in this world were love, destitution, and sneezes.
They clearly forgot about chili peppers.

Chu Wanning had woefully overestimated himself and sorely underestimated the chili peppers, choking so bad on the spice that his entire face was beet-red and he couldn't speak at all. The onlooking villagers were all aghast, while the kids, being kids, giggled from behind the adults, only to earn themselves swats on the head.

Mo Ran hurriedly put down the bowl and chopsticks he was holding and scooped another bowl of soup for him. The soup seemed to help somewhat, but his tongue felt like it was on fire from the hot soup on top of all that spice. His face was flushed and his eyes were watery when he looked up at Mo Ran, saying in a hoarse voice, “More.”

More.

Chu Wanning clearly meant more soup, but Mo Ran felt his whole body burning up at the sight of those teary eyes, that face the color of haitang flowers in early spring, and his mind drifted off course of its own volition.

For a brief moment, his mind conjured up an image from the past life, of that man lying beneath himself, panting from need and the effect of the aphrodisiac both, eyes open but glazed over and unfocused, body trembling ever so slightly, voice hoarse as those moist lips parted in soft moans, “Please...more...”

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre: “Examples of some things these people can't stand most”

Chu Wanning: Eating spicy food

Mo Ran: Watching Chu Wanning eat spicy food

Shi Mei: Participating in a triathlon with his muscles on display

Xue Meng: Forced to be gay

Mei Hanxue: The authorities closing down the brothel

Ye Wangxi: Marrying Song Qiutong

Nangong Si: His dog dying

Meatbun: Working overtime

Ch.137 Shizun and I Get Put Up As Guests

>> noncon flashback

The tips of Mo Ran's fingers were a little shaky, and his heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest.

The worst thing about men was that the head between their legs never listened to the head on their shoulders. Regardless of how much he really, truly, whole-heartedly did not want to, it still grew hot and hard, making him feel numb and prickly all over.

Cursing himself under his breath, he adjusted his sitting position so that no one would see before leaning over to ladle out another bowl of soup for Chu

Wanning.

But then his fingertip brushed against Chu Wanning's as he reached over to hand him the bowl. The contact sent a jolt through his spine that made his hand quiver, spilling a bit of the soup.

Chu Wanning frowned a little but had rather more pressing concerns to care all that much. He took the soup and downed it to ease the spicy numbness in his mouth. Next to him, Mo Ran stared speechlessly at his lips, lips that were a vivid shade of red from the spice, like a ripe fruit hidden between leaves, or a vibrant blossom upon a branch.

Lips that, if kissed, would be soft, warm, moist...

Pa!

Mo Ran slapped himself none-too-gently.

Caught by surprise, everyone stared at him wordlessly.

Finally coming back down to earth, Mo Ran cleared his throat awkwardly and said in a hoarse voice, "There was a mosquito on my face."

"Aiyo." A clear, female voice made itself known and began to raise a fuss. "Autumn mosquitos are the worst, just looking to suck enough blood to get through the winter. Did xianjun bring any medicinal salve?"

"Huh?" Mo Ran looked toward the source of the voice, a bit caught off guard. The speaker was a fetching young woman, her comely figure dressed in a blue coat and her shiny black hair brushed into a braid. She had a pretty face and fair skin, but when they made eye contact, her gaze was anything but shy as she made eyes at him.

Mo Ran didn't even get the drift, only thinking, oh, it's the lady who was singing earlier.

He might be slow, but the auntie sitting next to the lass wasn't. As someone who'd already had seven kids, she could read these little missies like open books, and so she followed through without missing a beat, "They're only here for a little while to help with the harvest, of course they didn't bother to bring any medicinal salve. Ling-er, go bring him a jar of it later."

The lass called Ling'er beamed happily. "Of course, I'll come by tonight with it."

"....." Mo Ran hadn't even gotten a word in yet and this enthusiastic pair of women had already decided for him between themselves, leaving him a little speechless. He turned to look towards Chu Wanning, just in time to see him taking out a handkerchief and slowly wiping the spilled soup from his hand, a touch of distaste in his expression.

Mo Ran was no good at dealing with women, so he said to Chu Wanning in a small voice, "Some of the soup got on my hand too, let me borrow the handkerchief when you're done?"

So Chu Wanning handed him the handkerchief, the same haitang-embroidered one that he had before.

Mo Ran remembered him carrying it around back at the Peach Blossom Springs too. Chu Wanning looked cold and distant, but was actually a sentimental person, something that Mo Ran had already noticed in the past life in the way that the type of clothing he wore and the decor in his room stayed more or less the same throughout the years. He just hadn't expected it to extend to even this handkerchief.

The handkerchief was so old that the color of the embroidery had already gone dull, but this nostalgic person still hadn't tossed it.

Mo Ran wiped his hand, then took another look at the handkerchief. Upon closer inspection, he was surprised to find that although the flower was carefully

embroidered, the needlework was rather poor, clearly the work of a beginner.

Thinking that Shizun must have done it himself when he was bored once, and mentally visualizing the way he must have looked, all serious and deadpan while stitching the haitang flower with a tiny little needle, Mo Ran couldn't help wanting to laugh...

He wanted to look some more, but Chu Wanning took the handkerchief back. Mo Ran said, "What are you taking it away for, I'll wash it."

"I can wash it myself," Chu Wanning replied as he picked his bowl up once again. Mo Ran was not about to watch him tempt fate again, and so he hastily swapped their bowls, saying, "Here, eat this bowl instead, I haven't touched it."

The village chief's wife hurriedly agreed, "It's alright if xianjun can't handle spicy foods, no worries, no worries."

Chu Wanning pressed his lips into a line, then after a moment, lowered his eyes and said, "Sorry about that," before exchanging bowls with Mo Ran. With Chu Wanning's bowl and chopsticks in hand, Mo Ran was just about to dig in when it struck him that Chu Wanning had already eaten from it, and his heart, suddenly all soft and warm, started pounding for some reason.

He picked up a piece of marbled meat and put it in his mouth, the chopsticks just barely scraping past his teeth, sliding past his lip...

What improper, preposterous thing *hadn't* he done with Chu Wanning in the past life? But in this life, just the touch of chopsticks he'd used against his own tongue, the bowl he'd eaten from held against his own lips.

Just this, and he could already hardly contain the flame within.

Regardless of how harshly he admonished himself, how many times he told himself not to think indecent thoughts about his pure, virtuous shizun, it was like his heart wasn't even his—he could make himself not touch him, but he couldn't make himself not think about him.

He had long since stopped hating Chu Wanning, but he had thought that, after peeling away the hatred, what remained of his feelings toward Shizun would only be respect and the desire to cherish.

But it seemed he was wrong. What was revealed when the black veil of hatred fell had actually been tender affection and scalding desire... he drifted in the ocean of desire, wanted to cling to the driftwood called rationality until he could climb ashore, but just one glance from Chu Wanning, one lightly spoken word, was enough to pull him back into the abyss of yearning.

He felt like he had truly gone mad.

Chu Wanning wasn't into men, so Mo Ran would sooner die than he would touch him, bully him.

And so the desire in him burned until it was a blazing inferno, swelled until it was a vast ocean, and he, drowning and burning, had little care to spare for anything other than the person in front of him, this pure person who filled his impure thoughts.

The autumn breeze picked up, bringing with it the fragrance of the harvest and a chorus of frogsong, and in this moment, sitting next to him, Mo Ran suddenly thought—absurdly, ridiculously—that it wouldn't be bad to spend the rest of their lives like this. He used to feel like he had nothing, and so fought for everything like his life depended on it, but now he felt like he had everything, and dared not ask for more.

The busy season for farmers lasted a little over half a month, during which Chu Wanning and Mo Ran stayed at Yuliang Village.

The little village could spare two rooms for them, though it wasn't exactly well-off so the place was rather barren. The village chief's wife gritted her teeth and fished out two thick mattresses^[17] for them, only to have her offer declined in unison.

Chu Wanning said, "We can just sleep on the straw, it's warm enough. Please keep the mattresses for yourselves."

Mo Ran agreed with a smile, "We're cultivators, after all, can't just take your bedding like that."

The village chief was guilt-ridden as he said, over and over, "We're really sorry about this, we had more mattresses before, but the village caught on fire last year when we were beset by an evil spirit, and a lot of things..."

Chu Wanning said, "It's alright."

The village chief and his wife finally left tremulously after some more consoling. Mo Ran set about adjusting Chu Wanning's bed, packing more straw under the padding in hopes of making it softer, looking rather like a dog busily dragging cushions and pillows to its nest.

Chu Wanning looked on mildly from where he was leaning against the side of the table, and said, "That's good enough already, any more and I'll be sleeping in a haystack instead of a bed."

A little embarrassed, Mo Ran scratched his head and said, "There wasn't any time today, but tomorrow I'll go to the nearby market and buy Shizun a proper mattress."

"And am I supposed to do all the farmwork while you go to the market?" Chu Wanning shot him a glare. "Just leave it, it's fine." He walked over and took in the scent as he spoke. "It has that nice grain smell."

Mo Ran protested, "No way, Shizun is no good with the cold, you can't just..."

"It's not even winter yet." Chu Wanning frowned. "What is all this fuss. Go back to your room already, it's been a long day, I can't even feel my feet anymore, I'm going to bed."

Mo Ran left obediently.

Chu Wanning took his shoes off, haphazardly rinsed his feet with water from the large clay jar, and was just about to climb into his straw bed when he heard knocking at the door. Mo Ran had come back, and was yelling from the outside, "Shizun, I'm coming in!"

"....." Chu Wanning was furious. "Didn't I tell you not to say that to me anymore!"

But Mo Ran only grinned and bumped the door open with his head as Chu Wanning fumed. He couldn't push the door open otherwise, because both his hands—with sleeves rolled up to the elbows to reveal firm, sexy arms the color of honey—were busy holding a bucket full of clear water with steam rising from it.

The young man's eyes seemed especially bright behind the steam, practically sparkling.

Chu Wanning's heart raced under his gaze, and he found himself at a sudden loss for words.

Mo Ran carried the heavy bucket of water over and set it down next to his bed, and then he said, face glowing and dimples warm, "Shizun, you worked too hard today, soak your feet first, then let me give you a foot rub before you go to sleep."

"N..."

"I know I know, Shizun's gonna say no need," Mo Ran said with a smile. "There is a need. It's your first time doing farmwork, you're going to be achy all over. If you can't get a good night's rest because of that and then can't get up tomorrow, the little kids in the village are going to make fun of you again."

The water in the wooden bucket was hot, just a little bit too hot, but not unbearably so.

Chu Wanning's bare feet sat in the water, the toes smooth and delicate, the lines of his ankles flowing and defined. His feet never saw the sun, and so the skin there was fair, pale, even.

Mo Ran mused about how nice Chu Wanning's skin was as he took it all in, even fairer and smoother than that of delicate ladies.

Thinking about it now, even that woman Song Qitong whom he'd married in the past life hadn't felt as nice as Chu Wanning did...*bah*, what was he *thinking* about.

So while Chu Wanning soaked his feet, Mo Ran sat down at the table across the room and took out a book to read.

He'd brought the book along himself, some dry tome about healing spells. It was so quiet in the room that they both subconsciously slowed down their breathing so that the other wouldn't hear. In the room lit by a single candle, the only sound was that of Chu Wanning's feet occasionally moving in the water.

"I'm done soaking, it doesn't ache anymore, you can go now."

But Mo Ran was persistent—he knew better now than to take Chu Wanning at his word when he said things like "it doesn't hurt" and "I'm fine"—and had already put down his book and come over to Chu Wanning's bed to kneel down on one leg, grabbing the foot that Chu Wanning tried to pull back and looking up at him with eyes that were not going to take no for an answer.

"I'll go after I give Shizun a foot rub."

"....." Chu Wanning really wanted to kick him, so that he would get the hell out and stop saying whatever the fuck he wanted in front of himself. [\[18\]](#)

But the hand gripping him was so strong, the skin a little rough, and the calluses at the pads of the fingers and between the thumb and forefinger rubbed against his foot, where the skin was extra sensitive from soaking in the hot water, so much so that it felt a little ticklish, and he was so busy trying not to laugh that he missed his last opportunity to pick up his dignity and kick Mo Ran out.

Half-kneeling on the floor, Mo Ran had already put his foot on his knee and began to massage it, gently and carefully, his eyes lowered in concentration.

"Shizun, was it cold in the paddy field?" He asked while massaging.

"It was alright."

"There's tons of dead branches and stuff in there, look, you got scratched on the side here."

“.....” Chu Wanning looked over at the side of his right foot, and sure enough there was a small cut there. “It’s just a scratch, doesn’t even feel like anything.”

Mo Ran insisted, “I packed some herbal ointment for such things, wait here a moment, Shizun, I’ll go grab it and put it on for you, Auntie made it so it’s really good, it’ll be all healed up by morning.” He walked out the door as he talked, toward his room that was right across from Chu Wanning’s, separated by a small courtyard that was only a dozen or so steps wide, and came back in no time with a small jar of sweet smelling ointment.

“Isn’t this a bit of an overreaction?”

“Of course not, what if it gets infected? C’mere, Shizun, gimme your foot.”

Chu Wanning felt a little awkward about it; in all the years he’d lived, his feet had always been a private part, since he’d always been fully dressed and never gone anywhere barefoot as a matter of course. This was a part of him that barely anyone had ever seen, and no one had ever touched.

It is said that the unknowing are fearless; he’d let Mo Ran give him a foot rub earlier because he hadn’t known what it would feel like, not having expected the tender, aching feeling, like getting gnawed at by ants, so now he was a little hesitant about giving him his foot again.

So Mo Ran stared at that pair of feet hiding hesitantly under the robes, pale white feet with a bloom of rosiness from their soak in the hot water. Chu Wanning’s toes were fine and delicate, with nails that were translucent like the thin layer of ice upon the surface of a lake in the depth of winter, and a light pink blush of color at the tips of the toes from the soak.

Like budding haitang blossoms frozen beneath the ice.

Mo Ran knelt back down, his expression gentle and respectful as he took the warm haitang flower in hand.

He could feel the haitang trembling minutely in his hand, petals quivering, and he was struck by the sudden urge to lower his head and press a kiss to it, so that it wouldn’t hesitate or be afraid, so that it might blossom and unfold.

“Shizun...”

“What is it?”

There seemed to be a raw quality to Chu Wanning’s voice, like the branches of a flowering tree laden with the weight of desire, the blossoms on the verge of giving way, droplets of dew just about to fall upon parched soil.

Mo Ran’s head snapped up, the candle flame choosing that exact moment to crackle, setting free a burst of sparks as a small stream of candle wax dripped slowly down. His gaze met Chu Wanning’s by chance, both their eyes bright in the light of the candle, with desire, with hunger.

“You...”

Chu Wanning dropped his gaze and said, mildly, “Get on with it, my feet are ticklish.”

Mo Ran’s entire face went red, but luckily it wasn’t too visible through his tan. He mumbled an acknowledgement and lowered his head back down to apply the ointment, the blush burning all the way to his ears.

But he couldn’t help hearing “get on with it” repeated over and over in his head.

He swallowed, eyes fixed on the soft skin.

Images from the past surfaced in his mind, becoming clear, coming into focus. He remembered the disheveled bedding in Wushan Palace, and the way Chu Wanning had looked all the fairer against those scarlet sheets, the way they had entangled like caged beasts, neck against neck, heavy breaths and low groans filling the hall with a ferocious, savage kind of tension.

He thought about Chu Wanning's muted moans, that icy voice melted into softly flowing water by the flames of desire, heated into a boil.

"Stop this nonsense... *ah...*" He could almost hear Chu Wanning's voice by his ear.

Mo Ran squeezed his eyes shut, furrowed his brows deep.

In this moment, he finally realized something: it wasn't going to be easy for him to be good to Chu Wanning.

If he were to keep his distance, he wouldn't be able to take good care of him, keep him warm.

But if he were to stay close, he might not be able to control the flame of desire within; he was afraid that his rationality might catch on fire in a moment of carelessness, that he might do something outrageous.

He wanted him, wanted to bed him. Even in this very moment, he suddenly thought that what he wanted to do wasn't to be kneeling here, giving Chu Wanning foot rubs and applying ointment to his cuts. This person was sitting right here in front of him, on the bed, and his own strength now was already no different from what it had been in the past. Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to push him off.

He wanted to take him, wanted to push him down onto the bed, wanted it so bad his throat felt parched, wanted it so bad it burned and ached, he wanted to kiss the breath out of Chu Wanning, he wanted...

"All done, Shizun!" He practically yelled out, startling Chu Wanning.

Only Mo Ran himself knew of the cold sweat drenching his back.

He suddenly felt so miserable—why couldn't he just be good to Shizun in a clean, genuine way? Why couldn't he just be rid of this burning desire?

Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning...

His Shizun was the loftiest person in the world, if he were to find out that his own disciple felt thus toward him, how disdainful would he be, how scornful?

It had been two lifetimes, already.

He didn't want to be looked at with scorn by him anymore.

Chu Wanning put his shoes back on. The whole time, Mo Ran sat to the side with his head lowered wordlessly, looking rather like an obedient, docile dog; only he himself knew of the insatiable wolf locked up inside.

A long moment passed before Mo Ran managed to suppress the burning in his chest. He said, "Shizun, rest well. If you feel unwell at all tomorrow, then please just rest, I can do both our shares of work."

Before Chu Wanning could reply, a delicate sounding voice rang out from the outside, "Mo-xianjun, Mo-xianjun, are you there?"

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre: If the main cast transmigrated to the modern day, what occupations might they have based on their skills?

Shizun: First, he'll be valedictorian of Lanxiang Vocational School, then become a mechanic who operates excavators and operators. Oh, right, speaking

of which, I swear if I write a modern BL in the future, I will write a CEO who drives a tractor. I've had enough of CEOs who drive Lamborghinis and Ferraris-- if they don't drive a Lamborghini or Ferrari, is it not a BL about CEOs? I'm so angry, I want the CEO to drive a tractor! I want to write about him driving a tractor! Chu Wanning, you are the protagonist in a BL about CEOs! Drive your tractor! Bump into someone's Ferrari! Go!

Dog: Chef, valedictorian of New East Cuisine Education. A chef who drives a Porsche, happens to be a couple with the CEO who drives a tractor, not bad not bad.

Xue Meng: Doesn't know anything, will probably die.

Shi Mei: Selling counterfeit medication. It's easier to earn money, but he has a good conscience and might not bear to do so, he'll probably go bankrupt in the end.

Ye Wangxi: Cop.

Mei Hanxue:Gigolo.

Nangong Si: Pet shop owner. If this really doesn't work out, the superintendent at a pig farm is fine too.

Ch.138 Shizun Just Might Blueball Me To Death

Chu Wanning directed a mild glance Mo Ran's way and said, "Someone's looking for you."

"...Ah? Who'd be looking for me this late in the day?" Mo Ran had nothing but Chu Wanning on the mind right now, long since having forgotten all about whatever had happened during the day with the villagers.

"It's the person who was singing earlier," Chu Wanning said in a pointedly understated manner. "You know, the prettiest girl in the village."

"Eh, really...? All the girls in the village looked more or less the same to me..."

Hearing that, Chu Wanning was silent for a moment before saying, "I was only gone for five years, when did you go blind?"

"....."

Chu Wanning's tone was mild, but in the instant that he looked up, Mo Ran caught a hint of what seemed to be a smile in his eyes, as if teasing him with some good-humored bantering. Happily surprised, Mo Ran felt his mood instantly lifting as well.

The farmer girl named Ling-er was holding something wrapped in a blue cloth with white floral patterns on it and yelling as loud as she could toward Mo Ran's room, "Mo-xianjun, Mo——"

"I'm over here." Hearing the deep voice of a man from behind her, Ling-er turned around to see Mo Ran lifting up one side of the curtain and leaning by the door to smile at her, "It's already so late, did you need something?"

Ling-er was startled for a moment before it melted into delight and she went happily over. "Good thing xianjun hasn't gone to bed yet! Here, this is for you, I got it from my auntie, like I mentioned during lunch earlier. P...please use it." She handed him the cloth bag in her arms as she spoke.

Opening the bag, Mo Ran found three little clay jars.

"What are these?"

"Medicinal salve," Ling-er explained enthusiastically while pointing at her cheek with a smile, "for your mosquito bite, from the field earlier..."

"Ah." Finally remembering what this was all about, Mo Ran was a little embarrassed that his offhanded excuse had been so naively believed that the girl had actually come all this way to give him the salve.

The villagers here were rather too gullible...

"You probably didn't get bit too badly though." Ling-er suddenly stood up on tiptoes and gave Mo Ran's face a careful once-over, smiling even more brightly. "I don't even see a mosquito bump."

Mo Ran cleared his throat. "I *am* a cultivator, after all..."

Ling-er clapped her hands together with a laugh. "You cultivators are so interesting! If I had the talent for it, I'd want to become one too, too bad it's not in the stars for me."

They chatted a bit, then Mo Ran thanked her and went back inside with the salve. Chu Wanning had moved to sit at the table and was flipping idly through the book that Mo Ran had left there; hearing the movement, Chu Wanning looked up at him.

"Medicinal salve," Mo Ran explained bashfully.

Chu Wanning said, "Did you really get bitten? Come here, let me see."

Under the candlelight, Mo Ran's skin was the deep color of honey candy, making his feature look all the more dashing. Chu Wanning stared for a while before asking, "...Where's the bump?"

Mo Ran scratched his head, embarrassed. "It went down already, my skin's thick." He put all three jars of the refreshing medicinal salve on Chu Wanning's table as he spoke. "I don't need these, Shizun should hang onto them instead, since you're more likely to get bug bites."

Chu Wanning said, without accepting or declining, "First the herbal ointment and now this medicinal salve, I'll have to open an apothecary at this rate."

Mo Ran only rubbed his nose and beamed a sincere, reserved grin. Chu Wanning reached out and poked his forehead, saying, "It's getting late, go back to your room and go to sleep."

"Mn, sleep well, Shizun."

"Sleep well."

But that night, in the two run-down straw huts separated by the small courtyard that could be crossed in ten steps, neither of the two could sleep despite the exchanged wishes, both of them tossing and turning restlessly.

It was needless to say that, for Chu Wanning's part, he could still feel the tingling in his feet, could practically still feel Mo Ran's callused fingers rubbing against his skin.

But Mo Ran's thoughts were rather more complicated as he turned this way and that, head pillowed on his arm while tapping restlessly at the seam between the bed boards, repeating over and over in his head: Shizun is a god, an immortal, an otherworldly being; no matter what happened in the past life, he definitely won't do anything stupid in this life, definitely won't bully him, definitely won't mess things up again...

And besides, there was still Shi Mei.

Yes, he should think more about Shi Mei instead——Shi Mei...

He suddenly felt even more uneasy.

Truth be told, ever since returning to Sisheng Peak and seeing Shi Mei again, he had found himself feeling rather lukewarm toward him.

To him, liking Shi Mei and protecting Shi Mei had already settled into a kind of habit, things that he was constantly doing, but then what?

He still felt fond of the Shi Mei of five years ago, but that beautiful man of five years since felt like a stranger to him.

The unfamiliarity left him at a loss; he didn't know what was wrong with him, or what to do about it.

Chu Wanning woke up early the next day.

Stepping outside, he came face-to-face with Mo Ran, who was just lifting the curtain and coming out of his own room.

Mo Ran greeted, "Good morning Shizun."

"Morning." Chu Wanning glanced at him. "...Didn't sleep well?"

Mo Ran forced a smile. "I'm not really used to the bed. It's alright, I'll just take a nap later."

They set off for the fields together, the early morning breeze bringing with it the refreshing fragrance of grass and trees. It was empty and quiet all around, with the only sound being the occasional singing of frogs and chirping of cicadas.

Chu Wanning yawned languidly, then caught something out of the corner of his eye that made him smile.

"Mo Ran."

"Mm?"

Chu Wanning reached over with a hand to brush through Mo Ran's fringe, plucking a piece of straw from his hair and saying with a small smile, "What were you doing, rolling around in bed? You've got straw in your hair."

Mo Ran was just about to defend himself when he spotted a small piece of straw on the side of Chu Wanning's head as well, so he also smiled and said instead, "Then Shizun must've been rolling around too."

And helped pick the golden straw off Chu Wanning's hair as well.

As the sun rose from the east, the master and disciple gazed at each other against a backdrop of resplendent gold, one with his head slightly lowered, the other with his head slightly tipped up, just the way they'd used to.

Except that, five years ago, the one with his head lowered had been Chu Wanning, and the one with his head tipped up had been Mo Ran. But years had flown past and Mo Weiyu was no longer a youth; in this moment, it was as if time was finally willing to slow down, and in the gentle dawn, Mo Ran suddenly jumped into the paddy field on an impulse, opening his arms and smiling toward the person standing on the raised ridge, "Shizun, jump, I'll catch you."

"....." Chu Wanning glared at the ridge that was only half a person tall. "Is something wrong with your head?"

"Hahaha."

He took off his shoes and hopped gracefully into the paddy field himself, sending a ripple through the water and a chill through the bottom of his feet. With a grand sweep of one broad sleeve and an air of imposing dignity, Chu Wanning marked off a large stretch of the field for himself. "This whole area is mine. I didn't cut as much as you yesterday, but I fully intend to beat you today."

Mo Ran's outstretched arms went up and scratched his head, then the corners of his lips quirked up and an especially charming smile spread across his face.

"Okay, if I lose, I'll make Shizun lots and lots of lotus crisps and stewed crab meatballs."

Chu Wanning said, "And lots of honey glazed sweet lotus root too."

"Sure! But what if Shizun loses?" Mo Ran's eyes were clear and bright, like they held the entire starry sky. "Then what?"

Chu Wanning glanced at him coldly out of the corners of his eyes. "What do you want?"

Mo Ran mulled it over for a long while, chewing on his bottom lip, then said, "If Shizun loses, Shizun will have to eat all the lotus crisps and stewed crab meatballs I make."

A pause, and then, in an even gentler voice spoken into the refreshing breeze:

"And all the honey glazed sweet lotus root too."

Win or lose, I just want to find some way to treat you well.

Chu Wanning had gotten quite adept at harvesting rice in no time, and he did not like to lose. It was enough that he had gotten made fun of yesterday, he was *not* going to be the butt of jokes today too. Thinking huffily thus, he worked with singular diligence, slicing away at the rice, and by midday he'd cut down way more than Mo Ran had.

He was rather proud of himself as they ate lunch under the mulberry tree. He didn't say it, nor did it show on his face, but his eyes kept wandering over to the side of the paddy field, where the rice he'd harvested was stacked into a formidable little mountain of gold.

"Ling-er, go get xianjun another helping of rice."

Everyone sat together, eating their lunch. Mo Ran ate fast, and his bowl was cleared out in no time. Noticing his empty bowl, the auntie spoke up in a hurry.

But Mo Ran put down his bowl and chopsticks like he was in a hurry, flashed a smile and said, "That's alright, I'm done eating. I have something to take care of so I'm gonna run out for a bit, it might take a while, go ahead and eat without me."

Ling-er was surprised at first, before it turned into unease. "Does xianjun really only eat so little? Is the food not to your taste? If you don't like it... I could... go make something else for you...?"

"No no, that's not it, the food's great." Of course Mo Ran was completely oblivious to the overtones of the offer, only waving her off with a forthright grin and heading off toward the stable with large strides.

Chu Wanning asked, "Where are you going?"

Mo Ran replied over his shoulder with a smile, "Just buying some things, I'll be right back."

"Xianjun——"

"It's fine, let him be," Chu Wanning said mildly as he picked up a piece of fried tofu with his chopsticks.

Although the two cultivators had arrived together, anyone with eyes could tell who had the higher status, who had the lower status, and whose word counted. On top of that, Chu Wanning looked cold and severe to start with, and now that he'd spoken, the villagers couldn't exactly press the issue, so they could only let Mo Ran go.

After lunch, everyone split off into small groups, some whiling the time away chewing tobacco, some napping under the sun; the women sat together knitting winter clothes, while the children played amongst themselves, riding on bamboo stick pretend-horses. A stick-thin cat sniffed hopefully at the ground, little pink nose twitching and ears sticking straight up, looking for leftovers to eat.

Chu Wanning was resting against a pile of grain with a cup of warm tea in hand when he saw the pitifully skinny cat and tried to wave it over, thinking to find it something to eat. But the cat was wary of strangers, thought Chu Wanning was raising his hand to hit it, and hightailed it out of there.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Did he really look that scary? Even cats didn't like him?

In the middle of sulking with cheek in hand, he heard the sound of copper pieces jingling. Ling-er came over cheerfully, also holding a cup of tea, and sat down next to Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning turned to look at her without much of an expression.

She was very pretty, and more than that, she wasn't skinny and frail, but a full-figured woman rarely found in such remote and desolate places. And she knew how to dress herself, too—she didn't have the money to buy accessories, so she had gathered some bits and pieces of copper and iron, washed them clean and ground them into smooth rings to string along the hem of her clothing so that she jingled as she walked and fairly gleamed under the sun.

"Xianjun," she called to him with a voice that was crisp as a ripened berry.

Chu Wanning replied, "What is it?" His voice was cool and clear like drifting mist.

Ling-er was a little taken aback at his standoffishness, but quickly put on a smile as if things were perfectly amicable and said, "Nothing, I just saw you sitting by yourself and thought I'd come over and keep you company."

"....."

Chu Wanning knew he didn't have a friendly-looking face, as evidenced by the cat just now. But people and cats were different, after all—cats never had any schemes, but people might have ulterior motives.

Sure enough, after a while of chattering about empty pleasantries and trifling nonsense, Ling-er threw out a casual, "Xianjun, what does it take to be...a disciple at Sisheng Peak? Do you think...I have a chance?"

Chu Wanning said, "Give me your hand."

"Ah..." She opened her eyes wide and excitedly did as told. Chu Wanning pressed the tips of his fingers lightly against the inside of her wrist, then drew back after a moment and said, "You do not."

Ling-er's face flushed red instantly. "D-do I not have the aptitude?"

"You knew I was going to check your core as soon as I asked for your hand, so you must've already had someone else check for you in the past," Chu Wanning said. "Cultivation is not in your fate, and you will likely not be able to build even just the foundation for it, even if you spend your whole life trying. It would only be a waste of time if you were to go to the peak, so it'd be best to forget about it."

Ling-er fell silent and her head drooped, crestfallen. A long while passed before she bit her lip and said in a small voice, "Thank you for the advice."

"Welcome."

She left quietly. Watching her back, Chu Wanning felt a little mixed. The common folk of the lower cultivation realm hoped even more fervently than those of the upper cultivation realm to be able to join a cultivation sect. Because to the people of the upper cultivation realm, cultivation was just a means of bringing honor to one's ancestors and making a name for oneself.

But to people of the lower cultivation realm, it was sometimes a means of survival.

Leaning against the pile of grain, Chu Wanning took another sip of the tea. The weather really was getting colder; the tea had gone cold in the few short moments he didn't drink it. He gulped down the rest and closed his eyes, thinking to rest for a bit, but with how late he had slept last night, together with all that physical labor this morning, he ended up sleeping through most of the day.

When he woke up again, the sky was already a deep red color, the crows were cawing at the branches, and all that was left between the paddy fields were stems of rice, neatly arranged, and scattered pieces of grain.

Chu Wanning's eyes snapped wide open in startlement.

To think that he had slept all the way to sundown, leaning against the pile of grain like this. The farmers probably hadn't had the guts to wake him up due to his status—not only did they just let him sleep the day away, someone had even covered him with a piece of clothing so that he wouldn't catch cold.

“.....”

The clothing...

Chu Wanning was about to sit up when he smelled a familiar scent. Breaking out of his daze, he looked down at the clothing covering him. The fabric was coarse, but it was very clean, with the refreshing scent of the soap beans used for laundering still clinging to its seams.

It was Mo Ran's clothing.

Upon realizing thus, Chu Wanning stopped in the middle of getting up and lay back down for some unknown reason, the muscles in his back relaxing as he hid half his face under the clothing, leaving only a pair of bright eyes above, slightly narrowed, holding some kind of indescribable and indecipherable emotion within.

He really must have lost his mind.

Eyes narrowed, he looked for that person in the paddy fields. It didn't take long—after all, Mo Ran had grown so handsomely tall that he stood out easily wherever he went.

He was currently helping the villagers load the cut grains onto the ox cart, and Chu Wanning could only see his back from here. He was probably hot from having worked all day, and so had stripped out of his outer robe and shirt like the other villagers, leaving his muscular, honey-toned back in full view.

In the burning heat of the setting sun, sweat slid slowly down the lines of his broad back with every flex of those muscles, trickled to the dimples of his back, snaked beneath the toned line of his waist...

He was like red-hot iron, like the coal in the furnace, taking every tender sentiment and turning it into burning carnal desire. Watching him from a distance, Chu Wanning gradually stopped seeing everything else around him, leaving only that person's gorgeous body, muscles flexing and sleek like a panther's, and the side of his face whenever he turned to chat with the village chief, with a soft dimple and a kind gaze, full of handsome charm.

As if sensing the eyes on his back, Mo Ran turned to look over his shoulder. Chu Wanning hurriedly closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

But his heart beat so fast it sounded like a rainstorm, the blood racing through his veins a low rumble in his ears.

A long moment passed before he sneakily cracked open one eyelid and peeked out from under his eyelashes. Mo Ran had already turned back around, and Ling-er was walking up to him with a bashful gaze and holding out a handkerchief to him.

“Xianjun, here, wipe your sweat.”

Hearing that, Mo Ran, whose arms were full with a pile of rice straws that he was moving onto the cart, smiled and said, "Later, I'm busy right now."

Ling-er seemed very happy to watch on from the side, reaching out now and again to help straighten things from falling. A bit surprised by her eagerness to help, Mo Ran said, "Thank you."

She grew even more delighted, standing there next to this tall, well-built man who was practically radiating masculine allure. Listening to his breathing and looking at his muscular shoulders, she couldn't help the blush that spread across her face, and for a moment forgot all about things like distance and propriety between men and women, clutching her handkerchief and saying in a soft voice, "Xianjun, it's gonna drip into your eyes if you don't wipe your sweat~"

Mo Ran bustled busily. "I don't have any hands right now."

"Then I can wipe it for you..." She felt a chill at her back before she'd even finished speaking.

Chu Wanning had come over to stand behind them without either of them noticing, still wearing Mo Ran's thick black outer robe draped over his shoulders, looking a little listless and irritable, like he had just woken up. He said, "Mo Ran."

"Yes?" The person who'd been so busy that he'd absolutely no time just now immediately put down the grain in his arms, and rubbed the tip of his nose as he turned around, beaming brightly the moment he saw Chu Wanning. "Shizun, you're awake."

Chu Wanning looked him up and down. "Aren't you cold?"

Mo Ran smiled and said, "I'm kind of hot, actually."

Right when he said that, the droplet of sweat that had been gathering at his dark brow dripped down and into his eye, and he squeezed it shut with an "aiyah" while the other eye stayed stubbornly open to gaze at Chu Wanning. Of course he couldn't just ask a lady for her handkerchief, so he said pleadingly toward Chu Wanning instead, "Shizun, my eye..."

"My handkerchief's hanging out to dry right now."

"....."

Ling-er hurriedly offered, "You can use mine——"

Paying her no heed, Chu Wanning walked up, expression impassive even as he leaned forward and tipped his head back slightly to look up, holding the cuff of his snowy white sleeve closed as he lifted his arm and used his sleeve to carefully wipe the sweat from Mo Ran's eye.

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre "What is the meaning of love"

Shizun: ...I don't know.

Xue Meng: Praise me, praise me as hard as you can, that's love.

Shi Mei: *sigh* It's love if you don't think that I'm a black-hearted lotus.

Mei Hanxue: It's love if you can help me get the role of the lead male.

Nangong Si: I'm only accepting Naobaijin as gifts^[19], loving my dog is loving me.

Ye Wangxi: ...Someone who likes me more than they like dogs?

Dog 1.0: (biting his pencil) ...*sigh* Who has the answers? Lend them to this venerable one so he can copy them.

Dog 2.0: I feel that I am about to find the answer to this question very soon.

Dog 0.5:(annoyed) What kind of question is this? -- "What is the meaning of 'shou'?" I don't understand, what is this shit, take it away, get lost get lost get lost.

Liu-Gonggong: (whispering) Your Majesty, this is read 'love', not 'shou'^[20]

Ch.139 Shizun, Pleasant Dreams

Mo Ran froze immediately.

He could smell the familiar scent of haitang, and though Chu Wanning wore a straight-faced expression, the sleeve on his eyelid was gentle and careful as it wiped his eye. But most importantly, this white-robed person was standing so close that he could see the fine lines in the texture of his lips, so close that all he had to do was dip his head down to kiss those lips, to take those tender petals between his own.

"You may have won, but you didn't wake me up, so it wasn't a fair match."
Chu Wanning voiced suddenly as he finished wiping the sweat at his brow.

Mo Ran blinked, then smiled, "But I didn't win. Shizun won."

"You didn't reap any more crops all afternoon?"

"Nope, and there's not much left either, so I went to the market, bought some things for the winter, and made a round through the village, which took up some time," Mo Ran said. "So Shizun reaped more than I did."

Chu Wanning hmph'd coolly, seeming satisfied.

He asked, after a moment, "What did you buy at the market? Mattresses?"

Before Mo Ran could answer, Ling-er, not wanting to be left out, cut in with a smile, "Xianjun bought so much stuff that I felt bad for the poor horse that had to drag it all back."

"It wasn't that much, just coal and such, some meat, and some sweets."

"Not only that," Ling-er said, "Xianjun also went and bought a mattress for each and every family! It was so many that the old cotton grandma just up and came back to the village with him, bringing the whole cartful of them."

Chu Wanning was a bit astonished. "Where did you get all that money from?"

"I had some savings," Mo Ran said with a smile, "and the mattresses were pretty reasonably priced, too. Much cheaper than the ones they sell in the upper cultivation realm."

"What's the meat for?"

"Impulse purchase. I gave it to the village chief to roast and share with everyone tomorrow."

Chu Wanning's face remained neutral and impassive as he asked, "And the sweets?"

Ling-er clapped her hands together with a giggle. "For the kids in the village, of course. Mo-xianjun gave out the sweets first thing when he got back, there

was malt sugar candy^[21] and osmanthus cake^[22]. The kids were delighted, lots of them have never even had treats like these before.”

She paused, then said, happily, “I got one too.”

The girl was a people person, and had a knack for getting close to others. Chu Wanning didn’t mind the other times she cut in, but this time he shot her a cold glare.

“Was it good?”

Ling-er answered freely, “Super good, very sweet.”

A sardonic grin seemed to tug at Chu Wanning’s lips, and he tossed out a, “Then help yourself to more,” before walking away with a sweep of his sleeves. Mo Ran didn’t know what he had done to upset him again this time, and was just about to give chase when something black suddenly covered his entire range of vision—Chu Wanning had tossed the robe draped across his shoulders at his face. Mo Ran pulled the robe down and looked anxiously toward him.

“Shizun?”

“What are you doing naked like that! I’m cold just looking at you!” Chu Wanning snapped. “Put on your clothes!”

“.....”

Mo Ran really was hot, but he put the robe on anyway, quickly and without saying anything, since Chu Wanning said so. The fabric got drenched by the sweat and stuck uncomfortably to his skin. He looked up from beneath his eyelashes, gazing toward the other at a loss.

Chu Wanning furrowed his sword brows. “Close your collars! Don’t just leave it open for the world to see! Indecent!”

“.....” Mo Ran immediately pulled his collars together, folding them tightly and high up, leaving not a peek of skin exposed, but all that did was give him an untouchable kind of allure instead. The sight of it made Chu Wanning even angrier for some reason; he cursed under his breath and walked away with a flick of his sleeves, leaving Mo Ran to stare blankly after him like a dumb dog.

The village chief, his wife, and Ling-er were all bewildered as they looked on from the side. Ling-er said, somewhat disconcerted, “This xianjun...sure is scary... I’ve never seen such a strange-tempered person before...” She spoke in a quiet voice, a little pitying and a little favor-seeking.

“Your master is so mean to you...you’re really patient, to be putting up with all th——”

She muttered while turning her head, only for the words to die in her throat as her eyes met Mo Ran’s—there was a dark expression on the face of the usually smiling and easygoing Mo-xianjun, and a terrifying, wolf-like ferociousness in his eyes.

She abruptly shut her mouth, and Mo Ran also immediately turned his face away, the look in his eyes no longer so discernible from this angle. Ling-er could feel her heart racing, unsure if it was her imagination just now, or if this person in front of her, who was calm and laid-back like a sturdy mountain, had shown an altogether different face of savagery in that instant.

Mo Ran mumbled, “Sorry, you guys go ahead first, I’m going to go check on him,” before walking off in broad strides.

He found Chu Wanning by the bank of the river, reeds dancing along the shores and the setting sun half-sunk into rippling waters.

Mo Ran came to a stop behind him, a little short of breath from how fast he had run. "Shizun."

"....."

"Did I do something wrong?"

Chu Wanning said, "No."

"Then why are you so displeased?"

"I'm plenty pleased."

Mo Ran blinked. "Wha?"

Turning to look over his shoulder, Chu Wanning said grouchily, "I'll be as displeased as I please."

Mo Ran: "....."

Not wanting to play word games with Chu Wanning, Mo Ran studied his expression instead and then couldn't help smiling as realization dawned on him. "I know why Shizun is upset."

Chu Wanning's hands clenched into fists in his billowy sleeves, and his shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly even as he maintained a calm expression. "I already said I'm not——"

But Mo Ran had already walked over to stand under the tree with him, grinning as he held a hand behind him. The old banyan tree at the riverbank had thick roots protruding above-ground like hardy veins that burrowed deep into the earth.

Standing on one of the protruding roots, Mo Ran looked even taller than he already was.

Somewhat alarmed and a touch displeased, Chu Wanning demanded, "Get down here."

"Okay~"

Mo Ran hopped lightly off the root to land right in front of Chu Wanning—the tree was so massive and sprawling that there was very little space not occupied by its roots; Chu Wanning stood in one such spot, and the only way for Mo Ran to avoid the high ground was to stand right there next to him.

Standing there with his head lowered, Mo Ran's breaths were practically caressing Chu Wanning's eyelashes, and so Chu Wanning felt discomfited again, demanding with a gloomy expression, "Go stand up there."

"....." Mo Ran couldn't help grinning. "Up and down and up and down, is Shizun toying with me?"

Chu Wanning knew he was being unreasonable in his irritable mood. Being thus exposed, he simply said nothing, remaining gloomily silent.

Mo Ran took his hand out from behind his back, holding a handful of candy that had seemingly come out of nowhere, a colorful little pile of ricepaper-wrapped sweetness cupped in his palm.

"Don't be mad, I saved some for you."

"....." Chu Wanning only grew even more mad, so mad he could spit blood, flames of rage burning high into the heavens. Sword brows furrowed in anger, he bellowed, "MO WEIYU!!!!!"

"Present!" Mo Ran hurriedly snapped to attention.

"Who wants your stupid candy? What am I, a three year old or some village maiden? I don't wan——mmf!"

A piece of candy had been stuffed into his mouth.

Chu Wanning froze in shock.

The tips of his ears flushed bright red alongside his face—whether it was out of anger or embarrassment was anyone's guess—and his phoenix eyes were open wide as can be as they glared at the grinning person in front of him with a mix of shock and fury.

"It's milk flavored," Mo Ran said, "your favorite."

Chu Wanning suddenly found himself a little speechless, and a little powerless, like a cat with its claws clipped, completely non-threatening despite the hissing and bristling.

He savored the milk candy in his mouth, a small strand of hair by his temple that had come loose when he stomped off earlier fluttering softly like a small leaflet in the gentle breeze. Staring at it, Mo Ran had the irresistible urge to reach out and tuck it back in.

Mo Ran was a man of action.
He thought it, and so he did it.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran said with a smile, "I got some candies and pastries for everyone in the village, but I saved the best ones for Shizun. The candy's tucked away in my sleeve and the pastries are in your room—I got you lotus crisps, really pretty ones—eat it in secret when you get back, don't let the little ones see or they'll want to try too."

Chu Wanning said nothing, and a long moment passed before he rolled the melting milk candy on his tongue and lifted his eyes where he stood in the field of reeds beneath that banyan tree to look at the person standing before himself.

After a while, he tossed out a haphazard, "Honey glazed lotus root."

Mo Ran grinned. "Got it."

"Stewed crab meatball."

"Got that too."

"....."

Chu Wanning turned his head away. He felt like he had dropped a little too much of his dignity today, and that he should pick it back up and dust it off, so he pointedly straightened his posture, lifting his chin slightly as he said, "Too bad there isn't any pear blossom white."

He probably thought he looked very stern and imposing like that.

It might have had that effect in the past, when Mo Ran had been younger and shorter than him.

But little did he know that this posture now served only to show Mo Ran his gently sloping jawline, his exposed throat, and his porcelain-fair neck.

He was like an arrogant cat flaunting its softest spot right in front of a wolf's fangs, conceited and oblivious, thinking it was intimidating the wolf when in truth the wolf wanted nothing more than to take his throat between his jaws, to lick and to kiss, to eat him whole.

What a dummy.

It took a lot of willpower for Mo Ran to move his gaze away from the underside of Chu Wanning's jaw, but his eyes were a little darker and his voice a bit deeper as he looked at the person in front of him.

He forced a smile, conducted himself the way a man of integrity would, and said, "I got that too."

Chu Wanning didn't quite follow at first, saying with furrowed brows, "What?"

"Pear blossom white."

Keeping his expression carefully steady, Mo Ran exhaled quietly as he forcibly suppressed burning desire inside of himself, but his voice came out a little hoarse.

"I got pear blossom white too."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"It occurred to me on the way back that Shizun might want some," Mo Ran explained, "good thing I picked some up."

Glaring at this disciple of his who was pulling out all the stops to get on his good side, Chu Wanning found himself at a sudden loss for words. He suddenly felt like there was really no point to being so difficult, no point to this veneer of coldness.

He finally relaxed by degrees, leaned his back against the old banyan tree as he studied Mo Ran. Then he said, "Mo Ran."

"Hm?"

"You've changed."

At that, he thought he saw a hint of unease in the depths of Mo Ran's eyes for some reason, but then Mo Ran's thick eyelashes fluttered, and he asked, "Does Shizun like it?"

"....." Chu Wanning said, "I don't dislike it."

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he stood back up and lifted a hand that hesitated in mid air for a beat before touching Mo Ran's side.

Mo Ran flinched, looking down at Chu Wanning with an apprehensive confusion.

"I read about your battle with the Drought Demon of Yellow River," Chu Wanning muttered. "Is this where you were injured?"

"...Mn."

Chu Wanning let out a faint sigh and clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. "You've done well. The title of Mo-zongshi is well deserved."

"This disciple wouldn't presume."

A small smile tugged at Chu Wanning's lips, and his hand poked Mo Ran between the brows before dropping back down to his side. "Then again, running around half-naked all day is indeed no way for a zongshi to behave. It's getting late, let's head back and turn in for the night. What's on the list for tomorrow?"

Mo Ran thought for a moment before saying, "I think there was something about cooking the rice to make rice cake."

Chu Wanning nodded, then suddenly said, "Don't just randomly take off your clothes anymore."

Mo Ran's face went red. "Got it."

"Take a break if you're hot from working."

“Okay.”

Chu Wanning mulled over things for a bit, then added, “Remember to bring your own handkerchief, and don’t dally around with unmarried girls. Do you have a handkerchief?”

“...Nope.” Mo Ran felt a little self-conscious.

“...Then what do you use to wipe your face...”

“.....My sleeves.” Mo Ran felt even more self-conscious over his own crudeness.

Chu Wanning was speechless for a moment before saying, “I’ll make you one sometime.”

Mo Ran’s eyes brightened. “For me?”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran was absolutely ecstatic. “I can’t wait! When is Shizun going to make it?”

Chu Wanning’s brows furrowed a little. “...After we’re done here, at the very least.”

“Then...I want one with haitang flowers too, is that okay?”

“...I’ll see what I can do.”

Mo Ran floated on cloud nine all night over the promised handkerchief that he’d gotten out of a handful of candy, rolling around in his newly bought quilt, too happy to sleep.

He had spent these last five years in a daze of agonizing misery.

This was the first time he couldn’t sleep because of joy instead.

His heart kept racing and just wouldn’t calm down. In the end, he gave in and sat up—his window was right across from Chu Wanning’s; he opened it a crack and leaned on the edge, taking in the refreshing scent of night in the countryside, gazing at the small courtyard, and the candle light across the courtyard.

Chu Wanning was still up.

What was he doing?

Was he mulling over how to make the handkerchief, or was he eating the lotus crisps?

Mo Ran watched that warm yellow light glowing in the room across from his for a long, long time, all the way until the light was put out and Chu Wanning went to bed, before wistfully murmuring:

“Shizun, pleasant dreams.”

And something else kept tucked away deep inside, something he dared not speak aloud even if no one would hear.

Wanning.

Pleasant dreams.

Author’s Notes:

Mini-theatre: What do the Shizun-disciple quartet use to wipe their sweat?
Cultured Chu Wanning: *Haitang* handkerchief

Neanderthal Mo Weiyu: Sleeve
Beautiful Shi-meimei: Foowish, how can a beauty sweat, even if I sweat I
won't let someone else spot it
Birdfolk: (.....)
Xue Ziming: A shameful handkerchief with the two words "Xue Meng"
embroidered on it. Madam Wang embroidered it for him because he always
loses his handkerchiefs, embroidering his name makes it easier for someone to
return them after he loses them...

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- [1] "carry" here is definitely the in-the-arms kind
[2] "Ocean of lust" here is a Buddhist term, referring to worldly desires. Buddhist
teaching goes that desires lead one astray from their base nature and cause them to
sink into the ocean of life and death
[3] [Lotus crisp](#)
[4] [Tangyuan](#) are glutinous rice balls with sweet filling inside, eaten during the
Lantern Festival
[5] [上火 \(TCM\)](#)
[6] [夜光杯](#) luminous cups are fancy cups made of phosphorescent jade
[7] [Collage of the meal](#)
[8] [Rattle drum](#) is a popular children's toy
[9] Two adulterers from *The Plum In The Golden Vase*, one of the most famous pieces of
ancient Chinese smut from the Ming dynasty. Pan Jinlian was Wu Dalang's wife, but was
spurred by Granny Wang to cheat on and murder him with Ximen Qing. They also
appear in *Water Margin*: Wu Song gets revenge on them for his brother.
[10] The original idiom is "浪子回头金不换" (lit. 'the reformed wastrel Jin Buhan'), used to
describe someone who turns over a new leaf.
[11] A dragon's inverse scale: Dragons are said have a scale grown in inverse
direction on their throat. It's their weak spot, and something not meant to be touched--
anyone who dares touch it is killed.
[12] 龙血 Longxue - dragon blood
[13] 玉凉 Yuliang - cool jade
[14] Literally translates to "lady aiding the *gong* to score"
[15] 吃百家饭长大的 lit. they grew up eating "hundred-family meals". Sometimes
when a child's parents are absent or unable to provide for them for whatever reason,
they are fed/taken care of by members of the neighborhood/village or by relatives who
are willing to help, so the child would stay with or visit a multitude of different families to
have meals with them on given days or for certain periods at a time.
[16] Rice paddy visuals [1] [2] zoom enhance [3] [4]
[17] Not the Western spring mattress, but cotton-padded mattresses [like so](#)
[18] Just to clarify, Chu Wanning really did curse here, this is not a translation
embellishment
[19] A pun on a commercial slogan for 脑白金 (*naobaijin*, lit. platinum for the brain),
a brand name for melatonin.
[20] 0.5 read 爱 (love) as 受 (*shou*)--as in top/bottom *shou*
[21] 麦芽糖 malt sugar candy (check out this cool [how-to-make video](#) and [one with](#)
[English subs](#))
[22] 桂花糕 osmanthus cake (trips and drops more recipe videos, this time with
English subs: [flour variant](#) and [jelly variant](#) for the culinarily inclined)

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.140 Shizun, Turn Over

Thanks to Mo Ran's well wishes, Chu Wanning had a dream that night. Unfortunately, it wasn't of the pleasant sort.

In his dream, he was back at Butterfly Town during the Heavenly Rift, but the person mending it with him was Shi Mei instead.

Amidst heavy snow from an ashen sky, Shi Mei couldn't hold out as a horde of ghosts stabbed through his heart, and he fell from the dragon-coiled pillar to the endless snowy ground below. Mo Ran rushed over and, gathering the bleeding Shi Mei into his arms, knelt by Chu Wanning's feet and begged him to help, to save his own disciple.

He wanted to save him too, but under the effect of the twinned barrier, he had suffered the same grave injury as Shi Mei. Face blanched of all color, he stood there without a word for fear that blood would come out if he were to part his lips, and the ghosts in the area would all rush them at once to tear them to pieces.

"Shizun...please...I'm begging you..."

Mo Ran was crying and kowtowing over and over to him.
Chu Wanning closed his eyes, then fled...

Shi Mei died.
Mo Ran never forgave him.

He dreamt of Naihe Bridge at Sisheng Peak during a cold spell in late spring. It was raining, droplets clinging to the tender beginnings of flowers and leaves on the trees, and the bluestone path beneath his feet seemed endless as he walked along it, holding an umbrella.

Suddenly, in the distance, across the bridge, he suddenly saw another person walking over in his direction, dressed in black and without an umbrella, only a stack of books wrapped in oil paper in his arms. Chu Wanning unconsciously slowed his steps.

That person had clearly noticed him as well, but his steps didn't slow. The only thing he did was lift those rain-laden lashes to cast him a single cold glance.

Chu Wanning wanted to call out to him, wanted to say: Mo...

But Mo Ran didn't spare him any chance to speak. Holding onto his books, he walked as far to the left side of the bridge as he could, any further to the side and he would've fallen into the river—just to get away from his shizun on the right side of the bridge, as far away as he could.

They met at the middle of the bridge.

One who usually used an umbrella, walking in the rain, and one who never had the habit of using umbrellas, also walking in the rain.

Then they passed each other by.

The one getting rained on kept walking without so much as a backwards glance, but the one under the umbrella stopped walking, stood rooted in place.

Rain pitter-pattered against the umbrella. Chu Wanning stood there for a long time, so long that his legs were beginning to go a little numb, as if the damp coldness in the air had permeated into his very bones.

He suddenly felt a tiredness so crushing that he couldn't take another step.

The dream faded to black.
It was cold and heavy.
Cold like the rain, heavy like the legs that refused to move.

Chu Wanning turned over in his sleep and curled into a tiny ball. Something slid from the corner of his eye and soaked into the pillow. He vaguely knew that it was only a dream, but then why was it so realistic, so much so that he could clearly feel Mo Ran's hatred, his disappointment, his spurn.

But...was that it?
Was that how it ended?

He refused to accept it; perhaps it was this refusal that made the dreamscape light up again.

It was still that dream, many months after Shi Mei's passing.

Mo Ran's temperament grew gloomier by the day, and he spoke less and less. He still came to all the cultivation lessons, but just to sit in and listen, never speaking to Chu Wanning more than he had to.

Chu Wanning never explained why he didn't save Shi Mingjing back then—seeing Mo Ran's attitude, he knew that nothing he could say would change anything now that things had come to this.

During a cultivation lesson one day, Mo Ran stood at the tip of a pine tree as instructed to work on concentrating spiritual energy.

But for some reason, he suddenly collapsed and plummeted straight off the tree. Chu Wanning flitted up to catch him without a thought, but didn't have time to cast anything, and the two of them fell heavily to the ground below.

Luckily the soil was soft and covered with a thick layer of pine needles, so neither of them was injured aside from Chu Wanning's wrist, which had been slashed open by a sharp branch and was seeping blood.

Mo Ran looked at his wound, and then, for the first time in months, lifted his eyes to look directly at Chu Wanning's face.

He said, eventually, "Shizun, you're bleeding."
The tone was a little stiff, but at least the words were pacifying.

"There's salve and bandages in my qiankun pouch, best to take care of it now."

They sat down on the thick cushion of pine needles on the ground, the refreshing scent of pine trees drifting in the air. Chu Wanning said nothing as he watched Mo Ran wordlessly wrapping the bandage around his wrist with his head lowered.

He could see the minute quivering of Mo Ran's eyelashes, though he couldn't see the expression on his face. For a moment, he wished he could gather up the courage to ask:

Mo Ran, do you really hate me that much?

But the breeze was so gentle, the sunlight so warm; birds and bugs chirped between the branches, and his injured hand was held lightly between Mo Ran's as he wrapped the bandage. Everything was so quiet and peaceful.

He didn't ask it in the end, didn't shatter the picture of serenity.

He suddenly felt like the answer wasn't really important anyway; what was important, in this dream after Shi Mei's death, was that his blood, his injury, could buy back a little bit of Mo Ran's consciousness, could ease the tension between them just a touch.

Chu Wanning woke up dazed the next day.

Lying in bed, he could practically feel the ache in his arm, as well as the lingering warmth. A long moment passed before he rubbed his face tiredly, thinking it ridiculous.

What was that nonsense in his dream?

It is said that dreams were a manifestation of one's thoughts; could it be that he was so miffed over how beautiful Shi Mei had grown up to be that he went and vented it out in his sleep, to dream something like Shi Mei's death...

Absurd.

He got out of bed and got ready for the day, washing, dressing, and putting his hair up, and soon enough had forgotten all about last night's fragmented dream.

The villagers were making rice cakes today.

In the lower cultivation realm, rice cakes were an absolute must for New Year's Eve, for good fortunes in the next year. Round-grained non-glutinous rice and glutinous rice ground into flour the night before were steamed by the women and elderly over hot stoves. It was a laborious process, but didn't really need help from the younger menfolk, so Chu Wanning slept in a bit and took his time strolling over.

Arriving, he saw a big wok propped up in an open field, and a wooden barrel half the height of a person was being steamed over the wok, billowing with hot steam. The village chief's wife stood on a footstool, adding rice flour into the barrel every now and then. A couple of kids were running around the stove playing amongst themselves, occasionally pausing to pull a bunch of roasted peanuts or a cob of corn from the firepit using metal tongs.

The part that Chu Wanning hadn't expected was that Mo Ran had gotten up as early as usual, and was currently helping the village chief's wife watch the stove. One of the kids ran a little too fast and tripped, let out a few sobs, and burst into tears.

"Oh no, you tripped?" Mo Ran helped her up and patted the dust off her clothes, asking, "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"My hand——" The little girl lifted her dirty little hand to show Mo Ran while bawling still.

Mo Ran picked her up, walked over to the well, and drew up a bucket of clean water to wash her hand. It was a little far, so Chu Wanning couldn't hear what he said to the kid, but the little one held in her cries, sniffled for a while, and stopped crying, and then another while later, started smiling instead, looking up at Mo Ran with snot still on her little face, and started chattering away at him.

"....."

Chu Wanning watched quietly from behind a corner, watched him coax the little girl, watched him carry her back to the firepit, watched him retrieve a sweet potato from the fire, peel it, and put it in the little girl's hands.

He watched it all from where he stood.

As if seeing the last five years of Mo Weiyu's life.

"Ah, Shizun is here?"

"Mn." A long while went by before Chu Wanning walked over to sit down next to Mo Ran. He watched the roaring flames beneath the wok for a moment, then asked, "What's in there?"

"Peanuts, sweet potatoes, corn," Mo Ran answered, "and now that you're here, a piece of candy for you."

"...Candy can be roasted?"

"It'll be burnt candy if Shizun does it, though," Mo Ran teased with a smile, "Let me."

He took out a milk maltose candy from his pocket, removed the rice paper wrapping, put it between the fire tongs, and held it in the fire for a brief moment before pulling it right back out and taking the candy. Sucking in a breath, he said, "It's hot," and blew on the candy to cool it down before holding it out by Chu Wanning's lips.

"Try it."

"....." Chu Wanning wasn't used to eating out of someone else's hand, so he reached out and took the candy himself. The milky white candy was warm and soft from the roasting, bringing out the sweet milky flavor as he chewed. Chu Wanning said, "Not bad. Roast another."

So Mo Ran roasted another, and Chu Wanning took it as before to eat.

"Another."

"....."

Mo Ran roasted eight candies in a row, and as he was roasting the ninth, a little kid ran over to ask him for a sweet potato. Mo Ran couldn't free a hand, and so had to ask Chu Wanning to do it instead.

Chu Wanning took the other pair of fire tongs and picked out the biggest one of the sweet potatoes. Mo Ran looked over and said, "Put that one back, get the small one next to it."

"The bigger ones are tastier."

"The bigger ones aren't cooked through yet," Mo Ran said with a smile.

Chu Wanning was a little unconvinced. "How do you know it's not cooked through yet?"

"Just trust me, I roast sweet potatoes in the wild all the time. Give him the small one, those are sweeter."

So Chu Wanning could only take out the small one instead. The little kid had no idea what a big name Chu Wanning was in the cultivation world, only that he was willing to help him pick sweet potatoes, so he sidled over and said in a small voice, "Da-gege, I want the big one."

"Tell that to the other da-gege," Chu Wanning said, "he's the one that won't let you have it, saying it's not cooked yet."

The little guy really did run over to Mo Ran. "Mo Ran-gege, I want the big one."

Mo Ran said, "You'll have to wait a while longer if you want the big one."

"How long is a while longer?"

"Count to a hundred."

"But I can only count to ten..." The kid sounded all wronged.

Mo Ran grinned, "Guess you'll have to eat the small one then."

The little guy sighed dramatically, but could only accept this injustice, drooping as he muttered, "Fine, the small one then."

So Chu Wanning set about peeling the sweet potato for him. As he was about to be done, the candy that Mo Ran was roasting also got to its softest point, any more and it would probably melt. So Mo Ran hurriedly took it out and offered it to Chu Wanning. "Shizun, open your mouth——"

Hands full of sweet potato, Chu Wanning opened his mouth without thinking twice; it wasn't until Mo Ran had put the warm, soft milk candy into his mouth, and the coarse-textured pad of his thumb brushed lightly past the corner of his lips did Chu Wanning abruptly realize that he had eaten the candy right out of his own disciple's hand, and the tips of his ears grew bright red.

"More?"

Chu Wanning cleared his throat, but luckily the color on his face was camouflaged by the warm glow of the fire. He said, "I'm good."

Mo Ran said with a smile, "Just enough to feed you; there's only one milk candy left, no more after that even if you wanted."

Feeling relaxed and at ease, he had spoken carelessly without a thought. And so had nonchalantly said something like "feed you". Of course such words were completely inappropriate from a disciple to his shizun, words that tasted of pampering and domineering, like an owner feeding his pet, an emperor feeding his concubine, words that could even be applied to matters between the sheets, the conqueror above using his scorching hot body to feed the moaning person beneath.

Chu Wanning was dazed for a good solid while, just drowning in those crude words.

After the rice was done steaming, the next step involved physical labor: all the young men in the village were to use wooden mallets to pound the rice cakes. The village chief gave Mo Ran a wooden mallet wrapped in gauze, and was just about to hand Chu Wanning one too when he was stopped by Mo Ran.

Mo Ran smiled and said, "Village chief, my shizun has never done this before, he wouldn't be any good at it."

"....." Chu Wanning was speechless at the side.

He was quite unresigned, a little indignant even, because from the day he left the temple he'd never been associated with the words "no good" by anyone.

All he ever heard from others were requests and pleas, things like "xianjun, please help with this and that".

This was the first time someone had ever stepped in front of him and said "he doesn't know how, he wouldn't be any good at it."

Chu Wanning was irritated. He wanted to fling his sleeves and bellow, *who are you calling no good!*

But he held himself back.

Because Mo Ran wasn't wrong, he really wouldn't be any good at it.

The village chief had them go to a stone mortar with a ball of steamy, cooked rice flour in it.

Mo Ran said, "Shizun, when we get started in a bit, turn the rice cake over every three strikes. Be careful not to burn your hands, and don't do it too fast so I won't accidentally hit you."

"...If you can hit me pounding rice cakes, you might as well quit cultivating and go be a farmer instead."

Mo Ran grinned. "I'm just saying, just in case."

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting any more breath with him, especially since the pair next to them had already gotten started, and he didn't want to be outdone, so he stood next to the stone mortar and said, "Get to it."

So Mo Ran swung the mallet, the very first strike landing heavily and solidly in the softly steaming rice flour, the ball sinking in around the mallet. He did it two more times, then looked up at Chu Wanning with bright eyes and said, "Shizun, turn over."

Chu Wanning turned the ball of rice flour over, and Mo Ran continued pounding it.

It only took a couple rounds for them to get the rhythm down: every third time Mo Ran lifted the mallet, Chu Wanning would nimbly turn the rice flour ball over, and then the strike would come down just as his hands withdrew. Rice cake pounding might look simple, but the force had to be carefully controlled, and the person doing the pounding had to have strength and stamina both, for it took countless rounds of turning and pounding to make the rice flour sticky and stretchy before the job was done.

After a while of this, Mo Ran was still going at it with ease, but the villagers next to him were getting tired, and started shouting, "one, two, three—one, two, three—" to the rhythm of the pounding. Intrigued, Mo Ran followed along with their rhythm. By the time the rice flour balls were half-sticky, everyone else was already heaving, but Mo Ran was still fine, smiling as he said to Chu Wanning, "Again."

Chu Wanning glanced at him. The young man's brow was covered in sweat, making his honey-colored skin sparkle under the sunlight. And his lips were slightly parted; he wasn't panting like the others, but his breathing was a little bit heavier, the rise and fall of his chest a little more pronounced.

Conscious of Chu Wanning's eyes on him, he paused before wiping his face with his sleeve, eyes bright like stars as he asked with a smile, "What is it? Did I get flour on my face?"

"No."

"Then..."

Looking at the way he was all hot and sweaty but still kept his collars properly folded all the way to his throat, Chu Wanning suddenly felt a little sorry for him. He asked, "Are you hot?"

Yesterday he had asked Mo Ran if he was cold, and now today was asking if he was hot. Mo Ran was confused to say the least—the temperature was pretty much the same both days—and he stared blankly for a beat before answering, "I'm alright."

"Take it off if you're hot."

"Shizun doesn't like that, so I won't."

"....." Chu Wanning said, "I like it even less if you're all sweaty."

Since even Chu Wanning said so, and the clothes were already uncomfortably sticky, Mo Ran went ahead took off his outer robe and inner shirt, tossing them onto the stone grinding wheel to the side. Chu Wanning watched with an icy gaze, when in truth his heart was growing warmer and warmer. He watched Mo Ran next to the grinding wheel, at the broad shoulders and back and those firmly toned arms, and he could practically feel the rush of warm air as Mo Ran took off his inner shirt. Mo Ran really was sweaty all over, his skin covered in a glossy sheen of it under the sunlight. Like a merman out of water, he turned around and smiled at Chu Wanning, looking dizzily, heart-racingly handsome.

“Would you like some?” The village chief’s wife was going around offering everyone tea, and had just gotten to them.

Mo Ran walked back over to the mortar and picked up the mallet again as he replied with a smile, “I’m not thirsty, but thank you.”

A hand reached over and took a cup of tea from the tray.

As Mo Ran and the village chief’s wife both watched on in awe, Chu Wanning gulped down the entire cup in one go before handing the empty cup back over and saying, “One more, please.”

“...Shizun, are you that thirsty?”

Somehow pricked by the question, Chu Wanning’s head snapped up, eyes bright and cagey as he said, “Thirsty? ...No? I’m not thirsty at all.”

Then he gulped down another whole cup.

Watching him, Mo Ran was baffled—just when had Shizun’s ego complex gotten so bad that he couldn’t even admit to being thirsty?

Author’s Notes

Mini Theatre: What Valentine’s Day

Dog: What Valentine’s Day? Who wants to steal my food, is dog food^[1] meant for humans? Can humans eat dog food? Put it down right now! I’ll bite whoever dares eat it!

Chu Wanning: I don’t want to join this party.

Shi Mei: (Idol Shi Mei who has changed out of his costume and is currently stuffing his face with his bento without a care for his image rolls his eyes) Please. If I really do go spend Valentines with A Certain Someone, you guys will probably have me celebrate Death Day^[2] instead. I know how it is.

Xue Meng: I do want to celebrate it, but I don’t think anyone can match me, so what can I do? I’m troubled too, y’know.

Nangong Si: Love and care for canines is the responsibility of all. Fight against Valentine’s Day, protect Naobaijin starts with me.

Mei Hanxue: Condoms for sale! Check out the air-thin Okamoto condoms!

Ye Wangxi: Excuse me, the gentleman upstairs, I’ll need you to come with me, sir. Since last week, my department has continuously received up to fifteen calls reporting you cheating your hookups. Please cooperate.

Ch.141 Shizun, Don’t Strip!!!!

>> brief papapa flashback

The two of them got back to work after having a drink, but Chu Wanning knew he was in for it as soon as Mo Ran lifted the mallet.

The vigorous movement made the lines of the young man's body look even more taut and defined, the golden rays of the sun pouring over his body like a waterfall, streaming down along sensually chiseled muscles, and when he lifted his arms and stretched out his shoulders, his chest was firm and smooth like rocks that had been bathing in the sun all day, harboring an unimaginable heat and strength.

The wooden mallet slammed vigorously into the mortar, sunk deep inside the moist softness of the rice cake, and trailed a sticky white as it was lifted again...

The swings came down one after another, with that immense, inexhaustible strength. Chu Wanning thought that if he were to accidentally get hit by a strike, he really might get crushed under him, shattered into pieces. Mo Ran panted lightly as he concentrated, chest rising to the beat of his heart. Sweat clung to his brows, the jut of his throat bobbed slightly every now and again, and the muscles in his arms flexed with each swing. Watching him, Chu Wanning suddenly couldn't help thinking of that dream he used to have over and over.

He had lain on Mo Ran's bed in that dream, had been invaded like the rice cake in the mortar, had been kneaded and humiliated until his body went soft... he stared off into space until he heard Mo Ran calling him.

"Shizun."

Or maybe Mo Ran had called him several times already.

"Shizun, Shizun?"

He snapped out of it, but his heart raced madly in his chest and a faint light wavered in the depths of his eyes. His throat moved, eyes a little unfocused as he responded, "Hm?"

Mo Ran's clear eyes stared at him from above, the heat of his body making those eyes seem even more fiery than usual. He said, "Shizun, come, turn over."

"....."

In those eyes, in those words, Chu Wanning felt dreams and reality folding into each other, becoming one. He suddenly felt a little dizzy, a scarlet red flashing by before his eyes. He saw two people tumbling between red colored bedding embroidered with dragon and phoenix in gold thread, a well-built man on top of another, tumultuous waves of red in an ocean of desire, and the toes of the man beneath were tightly curled, his calves twitching.

"Shizun, come, turn over..."

He could practically feel that man's hot breaths against the back of his ear.

"Let me look at your face while I fuck you."

Shocked by the images that had risen unbidden in his mind, Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head—what was that? A hallucination? Or an overly vivid recollection of *that* dream?

Heart thudding, he could feel the slide of cold sweat even as hot blood raced through his veins.

Sensing something wrong with him, Mo Ran put down the wooden mallet and came over to his side. "Shizun, you okay? Are you feeling uncomfortable anywhere?"

"No." Even his voice made Chu Wanning's heart tingle like it was being nibbled by insects, and Chu Wanning shoved him away forcefully, raising his embarrassment-turned-fury phoenix eyes, the corners of which were coloured with a light sheen of red. He gasped softly, hating his own perturbed mind to the extreme, "The sun is too scalding, I was only a little dizzy, don't stand so close to me, you're all sweaty."

Mo Ran looked down at himself and sure enough, it's true, and felt dismayed. He knew Chu Wanning had always preferred cleanliness, so he immediately stood down to the side, only watching with a look heavy with

concern, but nonetheless his eyes pursued that person, never wanting to move his gaze for even a second.

After that, Chu Wanning had kept silent and wordless until the rice cakes were steamed, and by the time everyone came to sit around, he was already gone.

"Oh, you're asking about Chu-xianjun? He said he has a bit of a headache so he's gone back to rest in the cabin." The village chief said, "When I saw him leave earlier, his cheeks were a little red, I hope he's not got a fever."

The moment Mo Ran heard this he grew anxious, and he stopped helping with storing the rice cakes, dashing hurriedly instead towards the small courtyard the two stayed at.

When he pushed the door in, there was no one on the bed, and he grew even more anxious. Suddenly, he heard the sloshing sound of water from the kitchen, so Moran quickly lifted the curtain and charged in recklessly.

And then he saw: Chu Wanning had all of his clothes removed, and was just in the middle of raising a bucket full of water, standing bare feet over the brick-red ground washing himself.

It was the end of October, the falling of frost on the calendar was already past.

Chu Wanning... He's fucking washing himself with cold water?!

Mo Ran was completely dumbfounded, his face turning blue, then white, then red alternately as he stared at the bare naked shizun, feeling as if he could no longer hear anything other than the rumbling of his blood flowing like the surging tides of the Qian River.

What did he see.....

This was the first time since his rebirth that he had vividly, clearly, and perfectly seen Chu Wanning's body. No haze, no concealments, nothing. There was only this familiar physique, the body that had macerated the defenses he erected, and tightly shut the floodgates of his memories. He felt his entire body was boiling with hot blood, trying to break free of his skin and flesh like the gushing of lava.

Everything was exactly as he was familiar, nothing was changed.

Suddenly, he found he couldn't breathe.

He saw Chu Wanning's shoulders, the curves and strength perfect like the bow that was pulled to seven parts taut, ready to shoot. He saw Chu Wanning's shoulder blades stirring beneath that skin as delicate as thin ice.

And then he followed the water stream, yes, he followed the water stream, the water stream eroded his sight and brought it downwards, and so he saw Chu Wanning's thin and slender waist, there were two pools of shallow dimples on his back and they were filled with wine, ready to poison all who desired his person.

Going down further, he saw the perky and sturdy buttocks, much like the ripened sweet fruit of autumn, and he knew what ecstasy it'd be if he touched them, knew the trembling of pleasure when joined, like his soul would split, and forever thus be kneaded into one with the person under him, becoming greedy once he had tasted goodness, unable to quit the addiction...

"Mo-xianjun!" Suddenly, there's someone calling for him, "Mo-xianjun, are you there?"

Mo Ran freezes and turns his head, but before he could stop the curtain it was pulled aside. Ling-er poked her head in, and said as she walked over, "Why did you run off in a hurry? My mom told me to get you to go eat the sweet rice cakes, you——"

She saw Chu Wanning was bathing, and her voice died in her throat.

Chu Wanning, “.....”

Ling-er, “.....”

“AH!!!” The girl screamed, covering her eyes in a panic. Chu Wanning’s expression was also extremely dark, and tried to grab for his clothes in a rare flurry, but how could he possibly have expected that there’d be two uninvited guests charging into his house when he came running back for a wash, what the hell!

He had always done what he felt like, so his clothes were ditched near the door when he stripped. Was he going to cross the entire kitchen in his bare naked body to go fish for clothes under the watch of a grown girl?

Just as he was stuck in this terrible plight, feeling helpless, Mo Ran came straight for him, raising his arms and propping it against the wall, blocking him off with his embrace.

Mo Ran twisted his head around and said to Ling-er, “Get out.”

“Ah! Right! Right!” That girl was also too startled, and actually stayed stunned for a moment before she stumbled out in a hurry, running far away in horror.

Chu Wanning, “.....”

Mo Ran’s expression was gloomy, and only after he made sure the girl really did go away did he sigh in relief, turning his head back.

Just to face Chu Wanning’s cold and indifferent face.

Only then did he realize his action just now was very much like a ferocious hound protecting his food, baring his teeth to scare off intruders before turning back around whimpering to lick and eat the food hard-won.

His arms were still propped against the wall, and in order to keep Chu Wanning firmly shielded, he was pressed very close, so much that he could easily detect Chu Wanning’s scent, and he stiffened unconsciously...

His head was burning, dizzy and heavy.

Scent was the easiest in evoking memories and desire, just as smelling the aroma of meat would make one hungry, and smelling plum blossoms would make one think of winter snow, all is the same.

Just like lust.

Mo Ran could only feel his mind surge, and the wall of determination he so painstakingly erected seemed to be toppling here and now. Chu Wanning’s scent was a spark that landed in his dry and arid chest, igniting his animal instincts, ready to burn him to dust.

Normally when they got too close, it didn’t matter if Chu Wanning was properly dressed, he’d still couldn’t help but feel his heart flutter, nevermind that the man before him now wasn’t covered by a single thread, wearing nothing...

He desperately wanted to seize Chu Wanning’s icy cold wrists still dripping with droplets, twist the man around and push him against the wall, then immediately rip off his own clothes, pressing himself forcefully against this person, hold this person, let this person’s back press tightly against his own chest, and brutally enter him just like this. Just like in the previous life, where the absolute power he held over this person’s life was in the sweat and panting, melting them back into sweet splendor.

He really couldn’t anymore..... He wanted him so bad.

Mo Ran’s breathing abruptly turned heavy.

He didn’t speak. Chu Wanning didn’t make a sound either.

The two pressed against the wall like this, standing very close to each other, almost touching. But the muscles of Mo Ran's arms were pulled taut, trembling subtly, forcibly hanging on.

I may not touch him. I may not touch him.

Respect him. Love him.

I may not commit anymore the absurdity of deceiving and destroying my masters and ancestors. I may not.

He told himself this again and again, mechanically repeating it in his mind.

The weather was cold, but thin sweat was already slowly dotting his forehead.

You can't... you can't... Mo Ran, you can't... Don't let your mind wander...

He gulped, closing his eyes shakily, shutting out that scalding gaze, yet his face already appeared lost and confused...

If this was the normal Chu Wanning, how could he not have detected Mo Ran being unusual?

But right now, his condition really wasn't any better than Mo Ran. Even worse, in fact.

He appeared cold and indifferent, but heavens know just how much willpower he had to expend in order to keep himself steady, and only then could he pretend to be calm.

Mo Ran's breath was so hot and heavy, full of the overbearing scent that belonged only to males, practically burning him. And the arms propped against the wall were so firm, so thick, so strong, so full of power. He hadn't sparred with Mo Ran since his rebirth, but he knew that counting strength alone, not counting spiritual power, these arms could crush him like nothing.

He didn't want to look at Mo Ran's eyes, so he dropped his eyes somewhat, his gaze landing on Mo Ran's chest.

While they didn't press together, Mo Ran is so close to him, there was practically only a thread of distance between them, and he could clearly feel that male tension emitted from that hot chest, broad and blazing.

Like he could melt the coldest solid ice in the world, and turn it into an uncontrollably overflowing spring.

"Shizun..."

The young man called out to him all of a sudden, and he couldn't tell if it was his imagination, but he felt the other's voice sounded a little hoarse, filled with the wetness of the fire of lust and hot breath.

Mo Ran had called him shizun many times before; calmly, respectfully, furiously, jokingly, uncountable ways.

But this was the first time he had heard a different "shizun"; it was nursed between his lips and teeth, dyed with the astringence of lust, sounding so filthy and alluring, Chu Wanning felt even the cracks of his bones were numbing.

Impossible. Mo Ran would never call him like that.

It was him who heard it wrong, it was him who was thinking too much.

It was his heart that was filthy.

He unconsciously backed away, and his bare back hit the icy cold wall. He shuddered involuntarily, his lips quivering as his mouth opened slightly, appearing a little at a loss and helpless.

The colours of Mo Ran's pupils darkened even more.

He stared at those moist and fair-coloured lips. While he didn't make a move, his fantasy had already gone wild as he imagined himself lowering to kiss Chu Wanning, prying his mouth open, and brutally invading that person's untouched forbidden grounds with his hot tongue. He imagined his hands clutching Chu

Wanning's waist and stroking him with vigour, leaving merciless red marks on that skin.

No matter how much he repressed himself, the blood of a wolf still surged in Mo Ran's veins.

The nature he set free was always going to be blazing and tyrannical, going as far as ripping apart the one going to bed with him between the sheets, devouring the other whole from the inside to out, licking up every last drop of blood, every inch of flesh.

He could never become tame.

Closing his eyes, suppressing the boiling lava in his chest, he knew this was bad. He knew how close to a beast a man's flared desire could be, and he had to chase away this completely oblivious rabbit before his lust broke free of restraint.

He withdrew his hands and said, his voice practically hoarse, "Shizun, I'll go get... your clothes."

Thick and heavy breaths brush past Chu Wanning's lashes.

Mo Ran turned around, walked to the door in long strides, and picked up the robes Chu Wanning had tossed there.

Chu Wanning was still leaning against the wall, but he felt as if he had just run a hundred miles, completely drained, and couldn't catch his breath. He squinted his phoenix eyes a little, and saw Mo Ran had his back facing him, rummaging through the clothes he had stripped over at the other end, and suddenly remembered the state of a certain body part of his. He blanked for a few seconds, then abruptly snapped out of it!

When Mo Ran entered earlier, he was showering with his back facing him, and when he had turned around, Mo Ran was pressed close so he didn't look down, which was why he didn't notice his rising desire.

But if Mo Ran turned his head around after picking up the clothes, then Yuheng Elder's haughty and pristine reputation, the aloof and ascetic image Chu Wanning had maintained for so long would probably crumble into dust in an instant.

Chu Wanning was instantly in a panic.

Seeing how Mo Ran had already sorted and tidied up his robes, holding them in his hands; seeing how he was about to turn his head around...

Chu Wanning was left with only two choices.

One: pretend his legs suddenly hurt and crouch down.

Two: jab his eyes out.

Before he could decide on one of the two awful options, Mo Ran had already turned around. "Shizun, you..."

You what?

He didn't finish.

Whatever he had to say was all cut off between his lips the moment he saw the sight before him, plunging him deep into the mire, never to resurface.

Author's Notes:

It's New Years~ New Year's greetings, everyone~

Chu Wanning: Happy new year, come to me if you run into any difficulties.

Mo Ran 1.0: Wishing everyone a happy new year, hehe, a prosperous Year of the Dog~ Everyone must be smarter than me, okay~

Mo Ran 2.0: Happy new year, you can come to me for help if you run into any difficulties, haha.

Mo Ran 0.5: This venerable one will gift everyone a verse personally handwritten by this venerable one 【Great Cock of the Year of the Dog】

Liu gonggong: ...Your Majesty, you've misspelt again...

Xue Meng: May you be as hot as me this new years

Shi Mei: May every girl here be prettier than me

Mei Hanxue: May the gentlemen here have better luck in love than me

Song Qiutong: May everyone have better skin than me~

Jiang-er: Bigger boobs than me, kay~

Madam Wang: May everyone find a partner who cares for you as much as Xue-lang cares for me

Xue Zhengyong: May everyone be rich! Get all the moneys! Hahahaha!

Boss: May everyone be successful every year, and please take good care of me next year, don't roast me too hard, thank you thank you

Meatbun: A happy new year to everyone! Thank you all! Muah muah!

Ch.142 Shizun, This is Cruel Torture

Turns out, in the split second Mo Ran looked over, inspiration struck Chu Wanning, and he spun around in the last second, propping himself up against the wall with his arms crossed, leaving the other the plain view of his even and powerful back.

This way, Mo Ran wouldn't be able to see his full frontal view. Chu Wanning thought he was brilliant.

This dummy, he didn't realize at all that what he exposed to Mo Ran's eyes were his low-lying and sensual back dimples, his full and firm buttocks, and his slender and powerful legs...He was like a rabbit who peeled his own pelt and stacked over the fire to grill, browned and crispy. He was practically saying "Please enjoy, thanks."

Mo Ran felt his throat running dry. His eyes were laced with red, and he had to hold himself back for a moment before he could speak. "Shizun, what... What are you doing?"

What was he doing?

...Hm...This position was certainly a little strange, but what should he say in order to smooth this over without arousing suspicion...

Chu Wanning peeked over, showing half a face, his expression cold and solemn, trying to cover this up.

Mo Ran had already put down his clothes and was walking towards him. Perhaps it was because his back was against the light, but Chu Wanning kept thinking the expression on Mo Ran's face was frightening, like a wolf in the jungle that had been starved for too long but the meat was hung over the claws of a trap, so the wolf hesitated, his hunger and reason engaging in a fierce fight, the flames of the battle itself spreading to his eyes. Mo Ran's black eyes were very bright, emitting a haunting glow.

Chu Wanning finally realized something was wrong, and three words were tacked onto the bow, the tone of them sharp, piercing through this peculiar silence.

"Scrub my back."

“.....Hm?” Mo Ran’s watery voice was frozen in his throat, carrying a nasal tone, sounding particularly sensual. “What?”

This really was just an excuse Chu Wanning came up with anxiously, at the end of his wits, but since his voice was already heard, there was no getting out of this, so he could only pretend to be calm, and said frigidly, “Since you’re here, come scrub my back before you go.”

Mo Ran, “.....”

“It’s been so busy these days, I’m covered in sweat and it’s uncomfortable.” Chu Wanning used his everything to appear nonchalant and very unconcerned, “It’ll be good to be scrubbed clean.”

He couldn’t tell if Mo Ran bought his lies, or if his lying sounded natural.

But either way, in the end Mo Ran still heeded him and obediently came over with a towel, used warm water to soak it through, then started scrubbing Chu Wanning’s back for him.

Yuheng of the Night Sky had always been wise. This had to be the dumbest thing he’d ever done.

What was the most excruciating torture in this world?

When the one you love passionately stood behind you scrubbing you clean with a pair of large hands with only a rough towel separating you two, and in the wake of every place washed was like a sail through spring waters, leaving behind small marks. Mo Ran was already holding back his strength, but he’s still very rough. Besides, Chu Wanning had never had his skin touched by others like this before, and it felt as if every inch of his muscle was trembling, so he had to tense up before he could scantily manage to remain calm, lest the one behind him notice his unusual behaviour.

He pressed his forehead against the wall, and tightly bit his lips out of Mo Ran’s sight, the corners of his phoenix eyes flushing red, his mind scaldingly hot, so much so that he was like the thick dew upon the branch, softly moist within the mist...

He was someone who had never experienced such a thing before too, but so what? He still had to endure such stimulation before the one he deeply loved, pretending to be haughty and out of reach.

This was too stressful.....

But if it was Mo Ran, what would be the most excruciating torture in the world for him?

The answer would be vastly different. He would probably say, it’s that person standing in front of you with his hands pressed against the wall, his shoulders unfolded, and completely unsuspecting of you, giving all of himself to you openly and unfazed, letting your hot hands knead across this field of early spring separated by a hindering towel, his mind filled with unspeakable filth.

Of course he knew he was scrubbing shizun’s back for him, but if he pressed just that bit harder, that person’s skin would redden, giving the semblance of him being bullied, of being abused.

The towel brushed past his shoulder blades as Mo Ran washed him delicately, but unconsciously, his ministrations grew ever the more vigorous. He could sense the slight quivering of the person beneath him, but he couldn’t tell if it was all in his head. He stared at that fair and plump curve, restraining himself to the point his eyes were laced with red so as to not toss away the washing towel and use his own hands directly instead, engraving upon the curve five bewitching red streaks.

He had long since thoroughly tasted the overwhelming flavour of the man before him, but so what? He still had to swallow his cries and endure it, force himself to be a gentleman.

This was too stressful.....

The two were stressed by themselves for a good while, and if this scrubbing continued, fire was going to be ignited.

At last, Chu Wanning couldn't contain himself anymore, and he said, his voice cracked, "It's good, you can go. I can reach the rest of my back on my own, I'll do it myself."

Mo Ran's sigh of relief was almost immediate, his forehead was already covered in fine sweat.

He replied glumly, "Okay.....shizun....."

The curtain of the door flapped and fell. Mo Ran had left.

A long time passed and still Chu Wanning hadn't come back around; he was still leaning against the wall, his forehead pressed against the surface. The tips of his ears were blood red, just like the marks left in the wake of the scrubbing, though he wondered whether Mo Ran had noticed.

"....."

He cracked open his phoenix eyes, seeming to be biting his bottom lip out of humiliation, but after a long hesitation, he still reached down. His Adam's apple rolled up and down slowly, it was blurry and damp within the mist, and the steam all around was so thick it couldn't be dispelled.....

He had originally run back to shower in order to suppress this sordid feeling.

Yet the heaven's plans superseded all, and under the most coincidental of circumstances, Mo Ran pushed him deeper into the billowing waves of the sea of desire. Finally on this day, Chu Wanning, who had always relied on purification cultivation to resist human nature, couldn't hold it in and had to employ the most basic and the most embarrassing common method to relieve himself of the desire that was on the cusp of overflowing.

His mouth is slightly open, his phoenix eyes half-lidded, looking a little pitiful, and a little aggrieved.....

He was pressing against the icy cold wall, but his forehead was flaming hot. His beautiful shoulders were raised, his Adam's apple rolling, as he suppressed his deep panting and haunting sobs.

So sinful, yet so beautiful.

Like a white swallowtail butterfly sunken in a spider's web, quivering its wings powerlessly in the tightly-knit lust, never, ever, ever, to escape once more.

He was dirtied after all.

Dirtied to the bone. Dirtied so wretchedly, so pitifully, luring others to conquer, drawing others into addiction.

In the end, Chu Wanning was practically indignant as he smashed a fist against the wall. He was so hardened, so frustrated, so unwilling, to the point that he used such a great force he scraped the skin of his fingers, and blood oozed out.

"Bastard."

He didn't know if he was cursing himself or cursing Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning's eyes were still wet, tender and affectionate, bitter and hateful, but there was confusion too.

In the blink of an eye it had already been more than half a month since they had come to Yuliang Village, and the busy farming season was coming to an end.

Since that scrub bath day, Chu Wanning had been avoiding Mo Ran like snakes and scorpions to ferocious beasts. It wasn't that he noticed anything unusual with Mo Ran, but that he couldn't accept the change in himself.

When a man had been austere and refined for too long, it'd be particularly easy for him to be holier-than-thou, otherwise why else would Chu Wanning so easily turn his nose up at others practicing dual cultivation? It really wasn't jealousy, Yuheng Elder really couldn't stand it, thinking it too lovey-dovey. Dislike.

He didn't look at erotica because he really didn't want to, that wasn't an act. To Chu Wanning, "to like" and "kissing" were things that he could still tolerate, but if he had to take it a step further, for example masturbation, or for example other such deeds, then his face would darken and he couldn't take it.

This was akin to someone who had been vegetarian his entire life, and if you snuck a bit of lard in his bowl, he might think it smelled good, but if you gave him a piece of meat that appeared browned on the outside but still carried the stench of blood on the inside, he would probably die of disgust.

That day, after he got himself off in a confused flurry, Chu Wanning sobered up. He panted as he stared at the stickiness on his hand, and felt as if a bucket of cold water had been dunked over his head.

His face darkened completely.

What was he doing? Was he so stirred up by a kid barely past twenty that he couldn't restrain himself, and actually needed to masturbate in order to appease the rolling tides in his heart?

Goosebumps flared on Chu Wanning's back. So, whenever he ran into Mo Ran after that, he'd stay at least three feet away, scared he might accidentally unleash the raging beast in his heart and do something he'd regret.

He withdrew. Mo Ran withdrew too.

Mo Ran was also terrified after the fact. He discovered his yearning for Chu Wanning seemed to be much stronger than he anticipated. The dam he erected from before almost couldn't stop the tempestuous currents anymore, the passion in his bones was going to overflow at any minute.

He was keenly aware that human or animal was but a moment of weakness, and he didn't want to hurt Chu Wanning again because of this moment of weakness, so he was also unconsciously avoiding Chu Wanning.

With the distance between the two pulled farther apart, it actually gave the illusion of a respectful disciple and a kind master.

And the days passed peacefully without incidents.

This day, the hunter of the village butchered a plump deer, and the villagers proposed holding a bonfire party in the evening at the small drying field at the entrance of the village.

And so every household brought out some food, be it cakes or jerkys, and the village chief opened two pots of gaoliang liquor too, the crowd sitting together, jolly and excited. What joy it was to watch the bonfire, smell the aromatic grease of the roasted venison, and eat and drink in merriment. Chu Wanning and Mo Ran didn't sit together, the two were a little far apart with the raging flames between them, and they gazed at the other through the fire yet not wanting the other to find out.

You'd steal a glimpse at me, thinking it was quiet and discreet, but the two gazes always managed to meet halfway, so both pretended it was an unwitting sweep of the eyes, and the gazes were dropped with nonchalance. A moment later, while the other was unguarded, the eyes would secretly climb onto the other's cheeks once more.

The orange firelight was surging, the firewood crackling.

Laughter and voices of cheer from all around were intermingling and crisscrossing, but they couldn't hear anyone, and they couldn't see anyone. The moon hung in the sky yet illuminated only the hearts of two.

The pots of liquor the village chief opened quickly bottomed, but the crowd didn't feel it was enough.

Mo Ran suddenly remembered that he still had a pot of the best pear blossom white in his own cabin, so he gave a quick heads up, then got up to go grab it.

Halfway to the cabin however, he heard a noise behind him.
He turned around, "Who's there?"

The rustling sound of footsteps instantly paused, then a pair of verdant shoes embroidered with yellow flowers sluggishly shuffled out from around the corner.

Mo Ran paused for a moment. "Oh, it's you, Miss Ling-er."

Ling-er had drunk a little too much, and her snowy jade-like cheeks were flushing red, her lips rich and bright. She stood there under the moonlight, gazing at him with affection, her full bosom rising up and down along with her quickened breath. She said, "Mo-xianjun, wait. I have something I want to say to you."

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre: Random Bad Edit of This Chapter's Conclusion

1. If Jiang-er was a spectator

Jiang-er: "Mo-xianjun, wait, I have something to say to you."

Mo Ran: "Speak."

Jiang-er: "Everyone wants me to ask you, when will you two do it?"

Mo Ran: "....."

2. If Jiang-er was a crook tour guide

Jiang-er: "Mo-xianjun, wait, I have something to tell you."

Mo Ran: "Speak."

Jiang-er: "A full course of roasted venison and farmhouse liquor is ¥899, will xianjun be paying by card or cash?"

Mo Ran: "...I thought meals are included in the tour?"

Jiang-er: "They are, but this is a bonfire party, it's an optional program at your own expense."

Mo Ran: "....."

3. If Jiang-er was a Cat Cafe Pimp

Jiang-er: "Mo-xianjun, wait, I have something to say to you."

Mo Ran: "Speak."

Jiang-er: (Rubs hands) Sexy bengals, intellectual British Shorthairs, fiery hawt American Shorthairs, Sphynx cats and others. Sign up for a monthly membership and you can enjoy unlimited petting and coddling all day, won't xianjun consider?

Mo Ran: ".....Do you have white cats? The kind that swipes at you ten times when you touch it once?"

**Ch.143 Shizun Turned Out to be My Pure Unattainable Love, My Bedazzling
Passion, the Apple of My Eye, My Fated One**

Now matter how slow Mo Ran could be, seeing this burning gaze, what more was there not to understand? He immediately replied, "Miss Ling-er, you've drunk a bit too much, we can talk tomorrow..."

"I WANT TO TALK NOW!"

This little girl could be ferocious too when she got tough; strands of her hair were loose, her eyes bright.

"....." Mo Ran didn't want to be bogged down and was about to make his escape using qinggong, but was stopped by her pulling on the corner of his sleeve. Mo Ran was both amused and annoyed, and demanded, "Let go of me."

"No." They say booze gave one confidence, and besides, Ling-er had always had spunk. It hadn't been only a day or two that she wanted to get closer to this xianjun of Sisheng Peak, so she proclaimed loudly, "I FANCY YOU. DO YOU LIKE ME?"

Mo Ran: "....."

Seeing the man had no reaction, Ling-er got a little anxious.

Since the day Mo Ran arrived in Yuliang Village, she had thought this man looked mighty and heroic, then later she learned that this was the "Mo-zongshi" whose fame had been spreading in the past few years, and her girl's heart ballooned even more, unable to be stopped.

The busy farming season was about to end, Mo Ran would be leaving soon. She was no more than a little chick of the Lower Cultivation World, the only thing she had to show for was a pretty face and her desirable figure. Although she didn't know how Mo Ran saw her, if she didn't confess now, another chance wouldn't come as easily in the future, which was why tonight she relied on being hammered to bolster her courage, following Mo Ran on his tail, and stopped him to confess her love.

Such torrent-like courage to tell the truth, even Mo Ran was a little astonished.

Ling-er's beautiful face was flushing bright red from holding her breath.

She thought, if Mo Ran accepted her, then it'd be great. Nevermind obtaining this handsome lover gege, but to gain this connection meant gaining the connection of Sisheng Peak, which meant she wouldn't have to be stuck in this crappy little village suffering the stench of pickles in the future. She would be able to live a comfortable life, and...

"Sorry, Miss Ling-er. I think you best let me go."

With only one simple reply, and he easily shattered the floating pavilion in the sky in her brain.

The blush on Ling-er's face had yet to recede before paleness took over, and suddenly, her face turned terrible. A moment passed before she asked anxiously, "Am, am I not good looking?"

"You look very good," Mo Ran was very polite as he gently pulled himself out of her grip, "But not my type."

If what he said earlier still gave her some face, then the "not my type" crumpled it completely, ripping away the last dredges of her dignity.

Ling-er's eyes were instantly filled with tears. Heartbreak wasn't the main reason though. While she admired Mo Ran, her crush never went that deep, and it was instead her desire to climb higher that was the more important, and she felt more keenly the disappointment of having her beautiful dreams shattered.

"Then..." She held back her tears and asked, "What does your type look like?"

“|——”

Her question however, managed to make Mo Ran stop.
What was his type?

Out of habit, he thought the type he liked looked like Shi Mei, but when the words came to his lips, suddenly he felt maybe that wasn't the case. All of a sudden he was at a loss, and he actually didn't know how to answer.

“Why won't you tell me, huh! What do you like?” Ling-er pressed on, her pair of beautiful eyes staring intently at Mo Ran's face, not letting go of any changes in his expression.

She was a pitiful person too; she had an older sister who married an ordinary fabric merchant from the Upper Cultivation World, and had moved to Leizhou Prefecture many years ago to live the good life.

She and mom had gone to visit her older sister before, carrying with them a bunch of peppered dried fish, but the brother-in-law resented the strong, astringent smell of fish, and he thought they were too unsightly, extremely embarrassing to have living at his home, so it didn't take a few days before he sent them back. This cut deep in Ling-er's heart, and ever since the day she returned, she refused to succumb to her own shabby life, swearing that she would live better than her older sister, and return all the grief she suffered from before.

So in these years, she had always been seeking out outstanding figures to give herself away and change her fate.

She really didn't want to let Mo Weiyu go.

Thus, her infatuation was practically fueled by desperation, and under the influence of alcohol, she leaned into him dizzily. She possessed a soft and sensual figure, when she walked across the paddy fields in the summer, the men would all try to steal looks at her. She was betting, and wanted to use her warm and soft body to tear apart Mo-zongshi's armour.

“Why am I not good enough? You didn't even think, you didn't even consider, and you rejected me just like that?”

She pressed her hot and limp body on him, but Mo Ran felt uncomfortable everywhere, and he pulled and tore as he yanked her off of him, his face dark.

“Miss Ling-er, I've only known you for how long? How can I like you, why would I consider you?”

“HOW WOULD YOU KNOW IF YOU DON'T TRY!”

Mo Ran saw she was coming onto him again, and exclaimed immediately, “Don't come any closer!”

“You don't like me that much?” Ling-er's eyes widened, and said in disbelief, “Not even a little... just a little...”

“I don't like you, not even a little.” Mo Ran thought maybe he wasn't clear enough, and a clean break was best for something like affection, so while it was a little cruel, he still added, “I am not interested, not even a little bit.”

Ling-er was speechless.

Not his type, she could understand.

But not interested...

How many unmarried men could face a woman who possessed an extremely good face and body, who threw herself willingly into his arms, and say with stern righteousness that he wasn't “interested”? That he could face such enticement from a beauty and felt not a shred of desire?

She was stunned, rooted to the spot for a good moment, then said, "How... how could you... Why would you..."

She was finding it a little hard to say the words.

He actually wanted to say: How come you don't feel a bit of desire at all? That's not normal.

Mo ran could deduce what she was thinking from her hesitation, but he really didn't want to explain further to her. They had merely met by chance, the woman wanted a one night stand but the man had no such intentions.

She could think of it however she liked.

Mo Ran said to her in a low voice, "Forgive me." Then slipped into the night.

The night breeze scraped at his cheeks, and he couldn't help but squint.

The conversation with Ling-er made him suddenly realize that maybe he had always been wrong about love.

Ling-er asked him, "What do you like?"

It seemed he had never asked himself this question.

Those who rarely received warmth never had the right to too many choices. Anyone who was particularly good to him, he would revere zealously.

"What do you like?"

This was something he never dared think of in his conscience.

Everyone in this world in fact had their own unique taste and bias. When Mo Ran was little, he'd often hear in the streets the other children tugging on their parents' sleeves saying "I like eating that one, it has scallions," or "Mom, this red lantern looks better than the yellow one, I like red."

But he couldn't utter the same thing, and it was pointless even if he did. What he could afford to eat was only the cheapest plain dough pancakes, and he had to split half and half with his mother too.

Later when he was at the entertainment hall, he'd also peek at those sugar daddy rich young masters, saw them fan their silk fans and say languidly, "I like the one from last time, Cui-er, why don't we have her sing for this play too. She's refined, and her voice is sweet." or other such.

Truthfully, in Mo Ran's eyes, Cui-er jiejie was far from as pretty as Bairong jiejie, but who cared what he thought? Whether it be appreciating beauty or making decisions, that was the rhetoric of the rich. To Mo Ran, whatever others gave him was, was. He should be grateful if there was anything to eat, shed tears if there was anything to wear—"Like"?

He'd be no more than a raving lunatic. On what grounds could he like anything? How could he dare like anything? What right did he have to like anything? He only had a cheap life he had to struggle for with all of his power in order to pathetically keep.

After life went by like this for too long, this habit of hanging tightly onto something when he obtained it was ingrained deeply into his bones, and afterwards, no matter how much money and treasure surrounded him, no matter how the richest perfumes and fragrances only made him sneeze, he still couldn't conceal the wretched poverty in his bones.

Looking through Mo Ran's life, he spent his childhood penniless and frustrated, his feelings were like the dirt under the soles of a shoe, worthless. So "what do you like?" was something no one would ever ask him.

Later, after he had reached the top, those who the emperor appreciated accompanied him like accompanying a tiger, the others could only speculate what was on his mind, so "what do you like" was something no one dared to ask him.

However, just now, Ling-er suddenly asked him this. A few simple words and it stumped him.

He once thought that to love someone, they must be respected and held in his hand with the greatest care, never daring to sprout any wishful thinking.

The way he treated Shi Mei.

He thought that was love. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with that.

But right now, in this moment, he vaguely began to realize maybe things weren't as he imagined.

Did he really like gentleness more than stubbornness?

Did he really like sweet-tempered more than firm and unyielding?

Did he really like eyes as deeply affectionate as peach blossoms, more than the sharp and piercing frost of phoenix eyes?

Did he... did he really like Shi Mingjing? And not... and not.....

He didn't dare think of that name, but the racing of his heart wasn't up to him, and his blood had become hot and boiling.

Mo Ran was shocked by his own love and desire.

Love and desire were never meant to be broken up, never to be separated^[3]. To be attracted to the other's appearance, be bewitched by the other's voice, the other's scent, even a single glance, wanting to conquer, wanting to possess, wanting to leave his own scent on that flesh that originally had no connection to him, wanting to drive his fervor into the other's body.

He had always believed love was sacred, and the object of his love was never to be defiled.

But how could he really *not* defile him?

When the body of the one he loved ardently, the one he desired, the one he admired appeared before him, how could he withstand and hold back the heated lust, and remain unperturbed?

There were all manners of love in this world, but only romantic love had nothing to do with purity.

It was destined to be stained by hot and sticky sweat, to possess the colour of flesh, and it was destined to be the mingling of hairs, to have the thick astringence of heath blossoms^[4]. It had to do with moans and passion, and it was destined to be the delicate and charming, plump and alluring stamen that could only breed from the wet mire that was a warmed bed.

Mo Ran fled urgently in the night, then came to an abrupt stop, his eyes bright and terrifying, his face astonished.

Something seemed to have snapped in his brain. The raging waves he had always suppressed by his complacency and stubborn foolishness was drowning him with overwhelming momentum, swallowing him whole.

He stood there rooted in horror.

Lust, desire.

Love.

Chu Wanning...

He finally dug this name out.

Cleared away the sand and dirt to reveal the precious treasure.

It had always been Chu Wanning... This intimate feeling, this blazing love, it had always belonged to Chu Wanning!

He felt his sight go black. Two lifetimes worth of delusion had been shattered, and the fragments of the brick tiles and walls were washed by the violent tide, crashing at his heart, making it hard to breathe.

He was astonished.

So, turns out... it was like this...?

The one he liked, his so-called love, had it been wrong all this time?

By the time Mo Ran returned to the bonfire party hugging the pot of pear blossom white, Ling-er was already gone.

Of course none in the crowd would notice the departure of a young girl, and of course no one knew her conversation with Mo Ran early. They were still drinking in merriment, lively as ever.

After three rounds of drinking, the villagers began to play games. They used a rice stalk to weave a grass ring, and asked a person to go up to beat the drums. When the drumming stopped, whoever the grass ring ended up with would be asked a question that they had to answer.

This was something fun the farming folks of the Lower Cultivation World came up with when they had nothing to do. The rules were simple, easy to get, and even someone like Chu Wanning who had no connection to fun whatsoever could easily get involved.

"Alright, it's Lao-Bai's turn! Coem come, Lao-Bai, come draw your lot!"

Looking miserable, Lao-Bai grabbed a well-folded sheet of paper from the giant bowl, opened it, and read out loud: "What looks better, a woman with large tits or fat ass?"

The crowd burst into laughter.

Lao-Bai flushed with anger, and yelled with the slip of paper raised, "WHICH ONE OF YOU DUMBASSES THREW THIS QUESTION IN? I'LL FUCKING FUCK YOUR ANCESTORS!"

"Don't." One of the villagers laughed, and tugged on his hem, "Don't go fuck the fucking ancestors yet, answer the question first."

That wife of Lao-Bai's was also sitting there too, glaring at him with her bullfrog eyes, her glare making Lao-Bai's hair stand, and he hummed and hawed for a good while before whispering, "I think they're both pretty much the same."

There was immediately someone who shouted with a laugh, "WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU SAYIN', DON'T LIE! You were just tellin' me the other day that women look better with a fat ass, better for giving birth, hey! What're you doin' not tellin' the truth! DRINK UP DRINK UP! PENALTY SHOT!"

Lao-Bai had no choice, so he grimaced with his miserable face and drank the liquor, and after that he got ear pulled and scolded by the wife good.

Chu Wanning was hidden in the crowd, feeling both awkward and curious watching this, but those kinds of questions were too vulgar, if they were posed to him, he would definitely have no answer.

Just then, the village chief happened to be holding a foot long black cloth, and said with a happy grin, "Let's change up the person drumming, switch Lao-Zhang out so he can play too. Who'll replace him?"

Chu Wanning immediately responded, "I'll do it."

He walked over to the thick leather drum, took over the drumsticks, and took his seat.

The village chief tied the black ribbon blindfold attentively, then adjusted it around, "Is it tight?"

"No."

"Can you see through?"

"No."

The village chief smiles, "Then will xiangjun please beat the drums. Stop whenever you want."

"Alright." Chu Wanning replied, then he picked up the drumsticks and knocked a couple times over the surface of the leather, then soon began to nimbly beat out close-knit drum beats, urgent and loud, varied and intricate.

He was blindfolded, so he didn't notice at all Mo Ran's gaze on him over the bonfire, so complicated and confused, so lost and scared.

Mo Ran gazed at him; the sparks of the fire were flying, much like orange fireflies scattering into the black night. He gazed at that man in the black night whose white robes trained the ground. Inch by inch, like a sharp blade, his gaze scraped across Chu Wanning's forehead, the tip of his nose, his lips, his chin.

To him, the Chu Wanning who was blindfolded by a black cloth emitted a mysterious temptation, but this time, Mo Ran didn't let this temptation slip away so easily. He carefully chewed on it, licking it.

He found within the taste of love.

He felt once again the shock in his heart, and he verified it again... He wasn't mistaken.

He did feel love towards Chu Wanning. It had nothing to do with the love shared between a master and a disciple, and nowhere near kindness.

He was simply in love with him, desired him, and wanted him.

He...

Finally, he realized in hindsight, that he loved Chu Wanning.

It was love.

He couldn't believe he was that muddled, that stubborn, that dumb, that blind.

He couldn't believe it took until today before he was finally enlightened.

He was in love with Chu Wanning.

After he had figured out this fact, the grave mound that had always been piling over his brain finally caved in, and many of the things he didn't understand before, many of the answers he couldn't obtain, were all rushing forth in this delayed love.

But he hadn't had the chance to taste it, there wasn't enough time to turn it in his mind.

There was a *DONG* and the drum stopped, and the remaining sounds cleared like a ripple.

Not too fast, not too slow, that grass ring landed right on his knee just then, and he picked it up in a daze. He looked up, just in time to see Chu Wanning sigh in relief and remove the black ribbon with a single hand, blinking open the pair of phoenix eyes streaming with moonlight, and gazing over, pure and perfect.

He was also curious, wanting to know where the wreath landed when he stopped drumming.

And so his eyes met Mo Ran's.

Chu Wanning, "....."

Mo Ran, "....."

There was nothing more awkward than when he was sneaking glances at you, you were also sneaking glances at him. The two gazes intersect, both a little evasive.

But Chu Wanning didn't evade for much longer. Because he suddenly realized in shock that Mo Ran's handsome face was currently enveloped in a confused and complicated tenderness and affection, and it crossed through the bonfire entwined with golden sparks, crossed through the bustling sea of people, and revealed so straightforwardly, so scaldingly, without concealing it because it couldn't be concealed.

Chu Wanning slowly widened his phoenix eyes.

"Nice luck, Mo-xiangjun." The village chief laughs, pulling Mo Ran up.

Mo Ran hesitated for a bit, then put the woven grass ring in his hair as per the rules. His black eyes were very bright, but the person himself was a little at a loss. After putting on the crown, he stole another careful glance at Chu Wanning. Then, that handsome face tanned so darkly actually began to gradually flush red under the firelight.

Chu Wanning was startled by his unusual reaction, and his eyes grew ever the bigger, fully round as he stared at him.

Under Chu Wanning's unconcealed gaze, Mo Ran lowered his eyes, pursing his lips and not uttering a sound, looking rather obedient and a little shy.

Much like the slow-witted young boys who, having reached the age of knowing what love is and falling in love for the first time, appeared so clumsy in every way, so stupid that it was a little pitiful, but also a little cute.

Chu Wanning, "....."

If he was startled before, he was shocked now.

...Was he going blind?!

Otherwise, why would he think that this big but dumb little devil would suddenly become so melodramatic, like he'd gone insane?

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre: How Come You Don't Have Any Reaction

Jiang-er: Mo-xianju, how come you've got no reaction to me hugging you for so long? Do you have some sort of affliction? (Looks at him with contempt) Shall I call an old traditional doctor over to check on you? Secret medicine passed on from the ancestors, expert at erectile dysfunction.

Mo Ran: ...Miss, cut sleeve. Ya get?

Jiang-er: Shook, your sleeves are cut? Want me to fix it for you?

Ch.144 Shizun, I Like You

Mo Ran caught a piece of paper from the massive bowl and unfolded it, laying it out flat.

When he saw the content of the paper, he first let out a breath of relief, then quickly became a little nervous.

"What is it?" The village chief asked.

Mo Ran thus showed him the paper. The village chief took a look and said, "Haha, thank goodness Mo-xianjun didn't come with any peer shijie's or shimei's, otherwise you'd be offending people."

Chu Wanning was already very curious what question Mo Ran picked up, but when he heard the village chief, he was now even more so. He kept staring at that slip of paper, looking as if he was going to burn a hole through it.

Mo Ran chuckled, "But village chief, you see what's written on here? It should be against the rules, right? Everyone else's is only a question, but this is technically asking me *three* questions."

"Xianjun's hand is quick and precise and managed to pick this one, what can we do." The village chief said, "If xianjun isn't happy with it, then toss it out and grab for a new one."

But grabbing a new one would probably end up being another "Do women with long legs look better or women with thin waists look better" or other such content, so Mo Ran chuckled, "Forget it, let's stick to this one."

He said as it handed the paper back to the village chief, "The lot I picked is to name the three people I like the most in my life."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Right at this time, Ling-er came back with the rims of her eyes red, but she didn't try to squeeze up front, afraid the others would notice she had just cried, so she sat by the outermost row by the bonfire, which was why Mo Ran didn't see her.

In fact, right after Mo Ran told what his question was, he didn't look at anyone. He felt that for such a personal question, it'd be awkward if he looked at anyone, and he wouldn't be able to speak, so he simply stared at the bonfire.

The bonfire gleamed in his black eyes, his handsome face flickering with the light and shadow from the reflection, and he gazed at that ball of flames, lost in thought for a long time before he said:

"Let's talk about my mom first, then."

"My mom passed fairly early on, I actually don't quite remember how she looked like anymore. I only remember that when she was around, I could always manage to eat and sleep soundly." Mo Ran said, "So if I have to name three people, then she will be one of them."

The village chief nods, "The profound love of a mother, very good, that counts as one, xianjun."

"Then the second one is my shige. He's very kind to me, and while we share no blood bond, he treats me better than a blood brother."

This was an answer Chu Wanning had expected already, so whether it be on his face or in his heart, there was no great turbulence. Mo Ran liked Shi Mingjing, this was something that was more than obvious, he had already heard him say so with his own ears back at Jincheng Lake, so he didn't feel too surprised.

He only gazed at that man who shone under the fire of the night; he possessed a firm and powerful, chiseled figure, incredibly handsome, and there was a hard-headedness in his bones. A great deal of a person's spirit could be

reflected in their eyes, and Mo Ran's eyes were black and bright, incredibly vivacious, like a lamplight that would never go out until the oil was depleted.

Someone with eyes like these were destined to be extremely stubborn.

Chu Wanning was crazy for this kind of stubbornness. Alas, this stubbornness didn't belong to him.

Mo Ran had talked on about how good Shi Mingjing was, but Chu Wanning heard none of it. He felt the night breeze was a bit chilly, so he poured himself a cup of hot tea, holding it in his hands, sipping at it slowly.

The tea warmed his throat all the way down, ending in his stomach, and enveloped his blood and flesh, heating them up, so much so that even his heart was melted.

He silently poured himself another cup and was about to drink once more when suddenly, he heard Mo Ran had finished talking about Shi Mingjing, paused for a moment, then said this:

"There's another one. The third person I name is my shizun."

"*COUGH!!*" It was as if Chu Wanning was burnt, and he chokes out a bit of his tea, coughing nonstop, his face deeply flushed. He was so focused on wiping away the tea stains that he never once looked up to look at Mo Ran.

Someone who was used to being insignificant when it came to feelings, when you pulled him up from the ground, he would only be scared and anxious over the dirt he was covered in, wanting to dodge back into the darkness once more, curl up and hide.

But Mo Ran obviously had no plans on giving him the chance to escape.

Chu Wanning was too closed-off of a person; if you let him have his way, he would always only show you the view of his back, the view of the back of his head. He appeared fiery, he appeared fierce, his eyes were as sharp as the sword, subtly filled with the intent to attack with roaring thunder, but Mo Ran knew that all of that was nothing but an exquisitely crafted mask made of human skin.

He had seen the gentleness of Chu Wanning's human soul, so pitiful and so helpless amidst the steaming mist of Mengpo Hall.

He never wanted to let Chu Wanning abuse himself like that anymore.

Chu Wanning should never wear that savage and terrifying mask again, and if this guy with the pride disease wasn't willing to take it off, well, he'd help give him a hand.

Only a little bit of the tea was spilled, it was long since cleaned, but Chu Wanning was still repeatedly trying to wipe away that invisible mark.

He was used to spinning a cocoon around himself, so he didn't look up.

Gradually, he sensed it was very quiet all around, so quiet it was a little peculiar, and there was even a child giggling, their voice seeming to be suppressed very low, but still anyone could hear it.

"Mum, Chu-xianjun is so silly."

The mom quickly covered the little mindless mouth of her child, "Shh——"

But Chu Wanning still heard.

Silly...

No, Yuheng of the Night Sky had no ties with the word "silly" whatsoever, he was unbridled and sharp, fierce and cold, he was——

“Shizun, if you wipe any harder, you’ll put a hole through the table.”

Black clothed boots had walked over to his tableside, coming quite close, so close it could almost be considered an affront before they stopped. Chu Wanning saw a stretch of a black shadow come bearing down, suppressing him like the mountains, so heavily he couldn’t breathe, so heavily he felt a little humiliated, and there was also anger from the shame too.

Suddenly, he was furious. Vexed by his own sudden feebleness.

Thus he slaps down the napkin and shot his head up full of provocation, and his pair of phoenix eyes brimming with rage glared at Mo Ran, his person tense and stiff, ready to attack.

But it was almost at the same second that Mo Ran said, full of respect and full of gentleness:

“Shizun, pay attention to me.”

Those words were like a spell that came to life along with Chu Wanning’s reaction, but only Chu Wanning himself knew that he didn’t look up because Mo Ran had said “pay attention to me” at all, it was just a coincidence.

But what use was it?

Besides him, whether it be Mo Ran or the crowd watching the show, they all thought Chu Wanning had promptly acknowledged his disciple because of this plea.

Promptly.

There was nothing more humiliating than that word, he felt like his dignity was utterly lost.

Chu Wanning’s face was like ice, but his eyes were burning with fiery sparks.

But what they met were only Mo Ran’s gentle and warm gaze that, like endless spring water, effortlessly enfolded his rage and his sharp teeth.

Mo Ran said, “Shizun, my third answer is you.”

Chu Wanning had nowhere to vent his indignant fury, so he turned expressionless, “.....mn.”

He appeared so unperturbed, so indifferent.

Extremely calm and magnanimous, as expected of the Chu-zongshi who had grown apathetic to the enchantments of the mortal realm. Chu Wanning secretly cheered for himself mentally.

But Mo Ran was watching him with amusement.

Mo-zongshi thought, could this Chu-zongshi be a little dummy?

Chu Wanning was completely unaware that he was slapped on with the label of little dummy in his disciple’s mind; since he was nervous, he became more and more cold and haughty.

“So? What are you trying to do, coming over here?” He demanded.

This question hit the mark by a fluke though, and the smile on Mo Ran’s face stiffened for a moment.

Mo Ran wanted to do everything.

But he couldn’t do anything.

So what if he liked Chu Wanning? He discovered it too late, and this person was already too far out of reach. Besides, he had already spent two lifetimes chasing after Shi Mei’s footsteps, so to suddenly tell him, you’ve loved the wrong person, and to have him turn around, in truth his own heart wasn’t able to accept it so easily either.

If he could understand his own heart right at the beginning of his rebirth, then perhaps none of this would be too late.

And now, this “discovery” was actually no more than adding on to his misery.

The torment he lashed onto Chu Wanning’s body in the previous life was too much, he was used to seeing bedroom plays as a way to bring about the most cruel of tortures against this proud and unyielding man.

So, in Mo Ran’s mind, Chu Wanning had in fact always been the image of a divine being, unsullied by the mortal world, and would never give rise to love and lust.

To ruin Chu Wanning, he had thousands of ways for improper intimacy.

But, to be good to Chu Wanning.

He couldn’t think of much.

And he’d turned really stupid all of a sudden. He only knew to maintain distance with shizun, and worship shizun at the altar while he himself prostrated below.

This “like” had in fact included a scalding and secret love.

But Mo Ran could not let Chu Wanning notice. He could only restrain himself while he used the “affection between master and disciple” to disguise this feeling of adoration, then very respectfully present it before Chu Wanning.

Thus, Mo Ran responded, “I just wanted to let shizun know, that’s all.”

“...” Chu Wanning watched him quietly.

Mo Ran added, “It’s just, I couldn’t help but want everyone to know...”

“Know what?”

Mo Ran suddenly laughed, his black eyes incredibly bright, so bright it was scorching, and could cover up the turbulent undercurrent of desire below.

“Know how lucky I am.” He said with a happy grin, “That I’ve gotten the world’s bestest, bestest, bestest shizun.”

He used three “bestest”s, it was extremely clumsy, but he worked extremely hard to express himself.

Rather the style of Mo Ran’s rustic simplicity.

Chu Wanning gazed at him with an unfathomable look, and only his lashes quivered for a moment.

Mo Ran inhaled deeply; he didn’t know where the courage was coming from, but he felt if he missed this chance, then he might not be able to express himself so daringly and without scruples again for the rest of his life.

He half-knelt abruptly, wanting to be at the same level as the sitting Chu Wanning, but unfortunately his build was too big, and even while kneeling, he was still looking down at shizun.

But he couldn’t care about that now. He could only feel how fast his heart was racing, and how rapid his blood was flowing.

“Shizun.”

“...” Chu Wanning suddenly felt danger.

The eyes of this man were too burning, and it forced him to lean back.

But in the end the sharp arrow still pierced through his heart.

“I like you.”

He had nowhere to run, the deer galloping in the woods was shot by the hunter in the leg, and so it dejectedly fell. Chu Wanning stared at him blankly,

there was a huge boom in his head, and he could no longer hear anything or see anything...

Like——how reticent, how ambiguous of a word.

It wasn't as straightforward and naked as "love", burning people the moment it's said, but it had so, so many ways for interpretation, and had given countless pining lovers the chance to confess whilst pretending to be calm, venting the overflowing love in their hearts.

Mo Ran thought to himself: I like you, but I won't alarm you or force you. You think the like I speak of is only the affection between master and disciple, and that might be a disappointment for me, but to you, it couldn't be better.

On the other hand, Chu Wanning thought to himself: You say you like me, but it's only out of pity; because I taught you and saved you. This isn't the like I wanted, but I had already done all that I can to exchange for this current favourable impression; I have no more energy nor bargaining chips to exchange for more of your love. That I can earn the validation as a shizun from you, a word of affection, it's enough. I won't ask for more.

Neither of them spoke any more to each other, and the crowd watching the show only praised it as the deep affections between the master and the disciple.

Only Ling-er who was in the corner vaguely felt something was not right. She studied Mo Ran's handsome face, and upon that face was a desire too deeply suppressed, and a fervor that made her feel weird.

But she was honest and pure after all, someone who had grown up in a small village had not even heard of homosexuality, and all she felt was strangeness, but how was it strange, she couldn't say.

There would always be some people in this world who, when they weren't in love, they could be heartless, fearless, domineering, and unafraid even if the King of Heaven was to come.

But once they did fall in love, it was raging fires and cooking oil, their hearts burning their eyes red, yearning constantly for the love and desire in their hearts to be discovered by the other, wanting to plunge into the sea of desire together, never to part.

However, if the other really was going to discover it? They'd steep in fear and trepidation, alarmed and anxious, scared the other wouldn't like them, scared of being rejected, scared of this, scared of that, and nevermind the King of Heaven! This time, if it was a mere cicada calling on the tree, something completely unrelated, they'd still think nervously: oh god, the cicada on the tree is calling, does that mean they don't like me?

The most obscure of love often was all the guessing and hiding, the permeating foul odour of distress that could be smelled from two miles away.

In the previous life, Mo Weiyu was Ta-xianjun. In this life, he was Mo-zongshi.

Notoriously egregious, brilliant for his generation.

He had been the most evil of devils, and had now become the most compassionate of persons. But this foul stench covering his body was still something he couldn't escape from in the end.

What about Chu Wanning?

That guy would forever be the fish in the net; any sign of disturbance in the ways of love could make his head throb, putting him in a dilemma.

And he just had to be dead determined in saving face too, sneering as he says: such rotten business, what's there to talk about.

Truly, screwing himself over.

Mini Theatre: Secret Crush Smells Really Foul

Mo Ran

Before he's fallen: Who're you? Whomst? Sorry, I'm busy. What? You're hungry? Then go get something yourself in the streets.

After starting to crush: Just as appeared in the text—Oh god, the cicadas on the trees are crying, dear lord, does that mean he likes me too?

Chu Wanning

Before he's fallen: You can come to me if you need help. There's no reason? Then why are you here? Are you that bored?

After starting to crush: ...You can come to me even if you've got no reason.

Xue Meng

Before he's fallen: Go away, ugly.

After starting to crush: Ahem... Now that I look closely, you're actually not that ugly, though compared to me you're still just a bit lacking, but still acceptable...

Shi Mei

Before he's fallen: Are you not feeling well? Are you alright? Come, have a seat, let me take your pulse.

After starting to crush: I'm not feeling well, can you stay with me for a bit? No need to call the doctor, just pour a cup of hot water and sit with me, okay?

Ye Wangxi

Before falling: All must adhere to the orders of the Rufeng Sect, the only exception being the orders that go against justice.

After starting to crush: All will go as you wish. Orders that go against justice... You won't go against justice, I trust you.

Mei Hanxue

Before he's fallen: M'lady, I will give you a sachet, a bracelet, a pair of earrings, a dangling hairpin, so will you give yourself to me?

After starting to crush: Same as the above.

Nangong Si

Before he's fallen: Go away, you're in the way of me feeding my dog.

After starting to crush: Come over here, ride my dog with me.

Naobaijin: ???ARF ARF ARF!! (Master, what happened to the weight limit of 70kg??)

Ch.145 Shizun Has a Meal Companion Now

As the colours of the trees dyed through, the busy farming season was over.

The villagers of Yuliang Village prepared a number of bags, big and small, packed with meat jerkies, rice cakes, species, coarse fabric, and the sort, and were stuffing them vigorously into Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's arms.

While Sisheng Peak did not lack for sustenance and utilities, this bore the hearts of the villagers, so it'd actually be poor form not to take them. Thus, the two didn't decline, and helped the village chief in filling the sacks.

Ling-er had come too, with a bamboo basket hugged in her arms, and the basket was covered by a cloth in the colour of various shades of blue. When the cloth was lifted, the basket was revealed to be carrying freshly steamed

sandwich buns^[5] and over a dozen green-shelled eggs^[6] that were already cooked.

She came in front of Mo Ran, her black and bright eyes dodging and hiding, wanting to look at him, but then felt embarrassed when she remembered her audacious confession that day whilst half drunk. She shuffled around for a bit before finally dragging herself over, balancing the basket on top of her head, and said to the handsome man who had already mounted his horse, “Mo-xianjun, I... I made this this morning. Take it with you, and eat it on the road with Chuxianjun.”

Mo Ran couldn't tell what her intentions were with this gesture so he hesitated, not knowing whether to decline or take it.

Ling-er however, understood his concern, and looked up. While she was blushing, her eyes were a little stubborn and a little hurt.

She might have done her everything to attempt winning the connection of an extraordinary xianjun, but she wasn't a girl who had no dignity and would keep clinging on when rejected.

She said, “Relax, xianjun. Ling-er doesn't mean anything by this. I just want to thank xianjun for taking care of Yuliang Village for almost a month.”

Only then did Mo Ran take the basket. Sitting there on horseback, he lowered his gaze and replied sincerely, “Many thanks, miss.”

“Xianjun is most welcome.”

Mo Ran felt somewhat touched seeing how she was able to take it so easily, so he asked after her a bit, “What plans do Miss have for the future?”

“Why does xianjun ask?”

“I just think Miss isn't someone who wants to live in villages for long.”

Ling-er smiled at this, the fight coming back to her eyes, “I want to go check out the Upper Cultivation World. I hear the zongzhu of Rufeng Sect is kind and is willing to assist talents with meager backgrounds all over the world. For us from the Lower Cultivation World, as long as we can find work to do at Lingyi, they won't chase us out. My needlework is pretty good, and I know how to cook too, so I should be able to get around.”

Of course, she didn't tell him the most important thing——The Rufeng Sect had the most disciples among the ten great sects, and the territory of the sect was vast with a total of seventy-two walled cities, big and small. Moreover, Lingyi was the metropolis of the immortal sects; five out of ten people walking on the streets were cultivators, and it'd be much easier to find herself a good husband there.

Chu Wanning didn't know about her intentions, so when he heard she was headed to Lingyi, he furrowed his brows slightly, “The waters of the Rufeng Sect is deep, they're not as simple as Miss thinks. If Miss only wants to settle in the Upper Cultivation World, then perhaps consider Linling Island of Yangzhou Prefecture instead.”

“It's impossible to live in Yangzhou, the cost of living is too high.” Ling-er said, “Thanks so much for xianjun's good intentions, but Ling-er has her own considerations.”

With her having said so much, Chu Wanning knew it'd be useless for him to say much more, so he let it go.

With their sacks filled to the brim, the two spurred their horses on. When they passed by Butterfly Town, Chu Wanning paid extra close attention to the barrier there, but thankfully the spiritual current was plentiful and everything was stable.

Thus, the horses kept on, and by noon they had finally returned to Sisheng Peak.

Chu Wanning went off to report in with Xue Zhengyong to brief him on how things went, and with nothing to do, Mo Ran he strolled about leisurely, bumping into someone as he came to Naihe Bridge, scrubbing the stone lions on the bridge columns.

Wonder who committed wrongs this time and got punished to do hard labour here this time, Mo Ran thought.

The ones being punished usually looked a little embarrassed, so Mo Ran hadn't planned on crossing the bridge. But just as he was turning around, he suddenly heard that person call after him from not far in the distance.

"A-Ran!"

"..."

On a closer look, turns out the one scrubbing the lions wasn't anyone else but Shi Mei. Mo Ran was taken aback for a moment, feeling indescribably weirded out.

One, he was weirded out that there were actually occasions where someone who followed the rules like Shi Mei got punished.

Two, he was weirded out by Shi Mei's current appearance.

Thinking of it, a long time had transpired since he last saw a fully-grown Shi Mei. However, he had never familiarized himself with his present looks and figure, so instead, with the passing of time, they were growing further and further apart, to the point where Mo Ran surprisingly didn't recognize him at first glance at the bridge.

"Why are you here? Did something wrong?" Mo Ran walked over to him and asked.

Shi Mei looked a little ill at ease, "Mn... together with the young master."

"Meng Meng?" Mo Ran paused for a moment, then started to laugh.

Well there was nothing to feel weird about then, it wasn't anything new for Xue Meng to do wrongs.

"What did he drag you into this time?"

"He said he wanted to go to the forbidden grounds at the back mountains to catch a few ghosts for training purposes."

"....."

"And ended up almost stabbing apart the crack in the barrier shizun sealed before he left."

Mo Ran didn't know whether to laugh or cry, "Does he think ghosts are cats and dogs to be caught and kept as he wants? You too, don't follow along with him when he's messing around, why didn't you try to talk him out of it?"

Shi Mei sighed, his expression filled with resigned helplessness, "Of course I tried to talk him out of it, but it was no use. I was scared he'll get himself into something, so I had to go with him... Nevermind, drop it. Thankfully no trouble was caused. A-Ran, let's talk about you. You and shizun went to Yuliang Village to help with the harvest a while back, right?"

"Mn."

"How was it? Did everything go smoothly?"

“Yea, it was pretty good.”

The two chatted banally for another little while, and after bidding farewell to Shi Mei, Mo Ran silently walked down a small, tree-lined path. With his heart laid bare and looking back now, he could sense more vividly the feeling he had for Shi Mei was more of an obsession, a habit, and not the love he thought it was.

He once believed that when he looked at Shi Mei's appearance and thought him beautiful, thought him divinely ethereal, thought it comforting, that that was desire. But it was not.

Humans had always appreciated things that were beautiful. He appreciated Shi Mei's appearance, but upon closer inspection, this appreciation had never carried any sense of impudent intimacy.

He enjoyed looking at him the same way he enjoyed looking at the mountains covered with red leaves in the autumn, ponds filled with lotus blossoms in the summer, and in these years, there were rarely any depraved fancies.

He still cherished Shi Mei, felt tender affection for him, the same as before.

Yet it was also not the same as before. The Mo Ran now finally understood what love was all about. He was no saint, his love should be hot and wet accompanied by the need to conquer, accompanied by the clashing of bodies, accompanied by the coursing of hot blood and the gushing of thick fluids.

He was a wolf that knew how to sniff roses.

But his teeth were ferocious, and if he really opened his mouth, what he ate would naturally not be flowers and grass, but blood and flesh.

By dinner time, Xue Meng finally finished organizing the books in the second classics section of the library. He sighed and whined in exhaustion, spreading himself over the table at Mengpo Hall complaining nonstop, and even his usual favourite spicy diced chicken couldn't coax him into a better mood.

Just as he was playing with the chopsticks in boredom, he suddenly spotted Chu Wanning entering the dining hall, and it finally gave him an energy boost as he straightened up and called out, “SHIZUN!”

Chu Wanning looked over and gave him a nod.

Mo Ran was sitting beside Xue Meng; he, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei had always eaten together, but when Chu Wanning walked in today, Mo Ran pushed all the dishes and bowls at the table a spot over, opening up a large space.

“What are you doing?”

Mo Ran didn't respond however, and only threw Xue Meng a grin before he stood up and waved at Chu Wanning, “Shizun, come sit here.”

Xue Meng, “.....”

Shi Mei, “.....”

Respect was one thing, but eating together was another thing altogether.

Those who could frequently sit together at the same table and munch on bones usually wouldn't be too constrained, at the very least they had to be used to the other smacking their lips and be able to withstanding the other's horrid eating manners or the occasional slip in behaviour.

Judging by the look on Xue Meng and Shi Mei's faces, even though Chu Wanning's eating manners had always been calm and distant, they still wouldn't be used to it, and wouldn't be able to accept having meals together with him.

To them, the occasional meal together with shizun was like a business social, and both parties had to keep a straight face, be polite, and after the meal, their backs would often be stiffened through and they wouldn't have registered what they ate.

Chu Wanning understood this as well, so after he gave Mo Ran a surprised look, he shook his head and still went straight to his usual spot, carrying some plain vegetable dishes.

He hadn't taken a meal in Mengpo Hall in five years, and the moment he sat down, Chu Wanning noticed there was a small, ornamented copper plate nailed in the corner of the table, and the words "Yuheng Elder's Special Table" were carved on it.

"....."

Does Xue Zhengyong have problems???

The wooden tray was set down heavily on the table, and Chu Wanning took his seat in dark gloom. However, before he had taken a bite, someone suddenly pulled out the wooden chair across from him, sitting down at "Yuheng Elder's Special Table". The tray brought over was placed next to Chu Wanning's plate, pressed very close, almost touching.

Chu Wanning looked up, "...Why did you come over?"

"It's too cramped over there," Mo Ran said, grinning happily as he picked up his rice bowl, "So I've moved over to eat with shizun."

Chu Wanning peered over to where Xue Meng and Shi Mei were, and felt a little baffled. How was it cramped?

Nevermind him feeling baffled, even the other two Mo Ran had deserted were looking rather complicated, and they watched Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's table secretly.

Xue Meng mumbled, "Is that dog thing out of his mind?"

Shi Mei, "....."

Mo Ran didn't care too much however. He was already feeling uneasy earlier when he peeked at Chu Wanning getting his dishes. This Chu Wanning was someone who was picky, particularly melodramatic when it came to eating and drinking, and oftentimes, it was either this made him queasy or that made him feel disgusted. Mo Ran didn't think that's good for Chu Wanning, it'll cause him issues when he's older.

In the past, he couldn't care less what Chu Wanning ate, but things were different now. Likes and dislikes aside, even if shizun spoke for himself, Mo Ran still had to properly feed his shizun.

But feeding Chu Wanning was a form of art in itself. Like feeding a cat, you couldn't just shove the food down their throats; if shizun didn't want it, he couldn't force it.

So an idea came to Mo Ran, and he picked up a piece of braised pork that was neither too fat nor too lean, and placed it in Chu Wanning's bowl.

"Shizun, try this."

Just as expected, Chu Wanning frowned, "I don't like pork belly, take it away."

Mo Ran was already prepared, and he smiled, "I hear it's done sweet in Jiangnan's style."

"The way Jiangnan cooks meat isn't like this." Chu Wanning said.

"How would you know if you don't try it?"

"I can tell by the looks of it."

"But the cook said it's Jiangnan style." Mo Ran cast the net, waiting for the cat to get baited, and he smiled, "Mengpo Hall's cook is an old chef, how can he

be wrong? It must be shizun who's left home for too long and forgot what braised pork looks like from your hometown."

"...Nonsense. How can I possibly get this wrong?" Chu Wanning countered.

Mo Ran ate a piece himself, and looked as if he seriously tasted it in his mouth, then said earnestly, "I think it really is shizun who's wrong. This meat is really sweet, why don't you try a piece if you don't believe me?"

Chu Wanning did not notice Mo Ran's ulterior motive at all, he was feeling a little indignant, so he picked up the braised pork in his bowl with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth.

"What do you think?" Mo Ran held back his laugh, watching this big, white cat who got baited.

Chu Wanning frowned solemnly and replied, "It's not it, the taste of star anise and fennel is too strong. I'm going to go tell the cook, this isn't how you make Jiangnan's braised pork."

"Wait wait——" Mo Ran immediately pulled him to a stop, and couldn't help but feel a little speechless. Who would've thought this guy would take this so seriously? If Chu Wanning really did go argue with the cook, wouldn't he be exposed? He quickly said, "Don't be in such a rush, shizun, the cook must be busy right now. Since shizun says it's not right after trying it, then it definitely isn't. I'll go and tell him in a bit, let's worry about finishing our meal first."

Chu Wanning thought about it and realized that's true, so he sat back down, and continued to eat away quietly.

And so Mo Ran began to scheme and schmooze him again, picking up a piece of fish this time.

Chu Wanning's chopsticks faltered for a moment. "Shad fish?"

"En."

"No. Take it away."

"Why not?"

"Don't like it."

Mo Ran laughed at the answer, "Is it because it's full of bones?"

"...No."

"But every time shizun eats fish, it's always the ones without bones, or ones with larger bones that are easy to pick. No way shizun won't eat it because it's a small-boned fish, right? Hahaha."

He was very familiar with the weaknesses in Chu Wanning's personality, grasped it extremely well, and sure enough, Chu Wanning was food again. He was slightly furious and said, "How ridiculous." Then he picked up the piece of shad fish Mo Ran had given him and ate it, proving with his actions that it wasn't that he wouldn't eat fish with a lot of bones.

And just like that, under Mo Ran's cajoling, Chu Wanning unwittingly ate way more dishes than he usually did, and almost every category of vegetables and meat was touched at least once. What would've been a meal that could be finished really fast if he was alone dragged on for almost a good two hours in a mess of confusion before the meal was over.

By the time they cleaned up their bowls and chopsticks and exited, Xue Meng and Shi Mei were already gone a long time ago, and there were only a couple of disciples left inside Mengpo Hall. Mo Ran accompanied Chu Wanning down the tree-lined small path to return to the Red Lotus Pavilion as the sun rolled obliquely towards evening, and twilight merged into complete darkness.

As the night breeze blew, Mo Ran strolled languidly with his arms pillowed behind his head, and all of a sudden, he smiled.

"Shizun."

“What?”

“Nothing, I just want to call you.”

“...I think you’ve stuffed yourself tonight.”

Mo Ran’s smile grew softer, “Yea, so stuffed. Shizun, can I keep eating with you in the future?”

Even though he knew Mo Ran didn’t mean anything by it, Chu Wanning’s heart still couldn’t help but skip a beat. Thank goodness his eyes were still calm and quiet.

“Why? Are you fighting with Xue Meng?”

“No no,” Mo Ran waved his hand and smiled, “It’s just, I haven’t eaten with them in too long, it’s been five years, so sitting together again feels a little awkward. But if shizun thinks I’m an eyesore, then I’ll go find another spot to eat by myself, it’s fine.”

“...”

Of course he couldn’t say “I think it’s very sad you eat alone”, and he couldn’t say “I want to feed you more dishes” either. Mo Ran knew none of that would work before he even needed to say it, so he could only act weak, making it sound like he was the one who’s pitiful, that he needed someone to keep him company. Chu Wanning had always been kind, he wouldn’t reject him.

Mo Ran could practically see the wavering in Chu Wanning’s eyes, he just needed one last push.

So he added, “But truth be told, I really don’t want to eat alone.”

“Why’s that?”

Mo Ran lowered his soft lashes; half of the emotions in his smile were real, and the other half were born for the sake of coaxing Chu Wanning. “Shizun, someone who so casually eats by themselves is simply satisfying hunger, don’t you think?”

He paused for a moment, and amidst the splendid red glow of dusk, he brushed aside the loose strands of hair that had been blown to his forehead by the breeze, his dimples deep as he gazed deeply at the other.

“If two people were to eat together, chat, make some conversation, and there’s flavour in your mouth when you eat, it’s warm in your stomach when the food goes down, then *that’s* what having a meal is all about.”

“...”

“Shizun, can I still eat with you tomorrow?”

No one could combat it when the little wolf pup really worked his warm, sweet-talking.

Mo Ran was determined to move him, so he said:

“Shizun, I spent five years out there all alone. Now that you’re awake, I’ll always eat with you.”

“Without you, I won’t be comfortable.”

“I won’t eat rabbit heads, I won’t eat duck necks either, okay~” He pfft-ed and laughed at the end, going over to tug on Chu Wanning’s sleeve shamelessly, “I’ll

eat tofu with sprinkled scallion and sweet osmanthus lotus roots with you, so won't you say yes?"

It would've been good if he hadn't brought this up, but now that he had, Chu Wanning was suddenly reminded of old scores from the past, and his face fell as he snorted, "It's fine, but you have to eat exactly what I eat in the mornings."

Mo Ran agreed before his head was able to wrap around what Chu Wanning said, "Sure, and what's that?"

"Salted tofu pudding." Chu Wanning replied cruelly, "With seaweed."

Mo Ran, "....."

Was he bringing up the old grievances he kept score of when they had hotpot together while he was Xia Sini!

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and enunciated word by word, "And. Dried. Shrimp."

Ch.146 But Shizun, Her Wanting to Marry Really Has Nothing to Do With Me!

Since that day, an extraordinary sight had appeared in Mengpo Hall. At "Yuheng Elder's Special Table" where no idol soul ever dared to disturb now had a Mo Weiyu.

The disciples walking past could always see Mo Ran and Chu Wanning eating together, the two sitting there face to face, and Mo Ran would always pick from some dish and put pieces in his shizun's bowl.

"Shh, look, Mo-shixiong passed the elder a piece of brisket again. Whoa, such a big chunk, I bet Yuheng Elder won't eat it."

There was a group of disciples nearby whispering among themselves, making bets with suppressed voices.

"I bet he won't eat it too, Yuheng Elder doesn't seem like he enjoys eating beef."

"Then I'll bet he does. After all, he accepted those pigeon eggs from before."

The group of them spied and snuck looks while holding their breaths, and saw Chu Wanning furrowing his brows as he poked at that piece of beef with the tips of his chopsticks, then said something to Mo Ran with a dark look.

They were a little too far away, they couldn't hear clearly what was said, but it seemed Mo Ran also said something, and Chu Wanning's face was pulled even longer.

Disciples A B C who bet Chu Wanning wouldn't eat instantly lit up, but they were too focused on watching that the spoons full of soup in their hands were almost sent to their nostrils.

"Look look look, the elder is rejecting it, he's refusing to eat it!"

"Don't jab me with your elbow, lower your voice. If Yuheng Elder hears you're all placing bets on him, he'll skin you all alive!"

"Heh heh heh, I don't care, these twenty silver leaves are mine~"

That disciple said as he reached for the stack of silver leaves placed for the betting on the table, but before his hand could touch it he heard the others beside him whisper in a rush, “Hold on, the bet hasn’t been called yet, the elder is moving his chopsticks again!”

‘Huh?’

He looked over again, and sure enough, Chu Wanning picked up that piece of beef brisket, and this group of gamblers watched on anxiously, feeling as if their own hearts were being dangled by that pair of white jade chopsticks too, stuck and in pain from the pinching.

“He’s gonna eat it he’s gonna eat it he’s gonna eat it... twenty silver leaves twenty silver leaves twenty silver leaves...” The disciple who bet Chu Wanning would eat that beef brisket chanted nonstop, nervously shaking his leg, but suddenly, his eyes dimmed, and it was as if his whole person was frozen. “Ah!!”

Yuheng Elder actually threw the beef he already picked up back into Mo Ran’s bowl without listening to the protests!

“.....”

“Hahahaha, close, so close!”

“I knew the elder definitely wouldn’t eat it, come, all the leaves belong to me now.”

The disciple who lost the bet sighed, instantly withering as he smacked his head down against the table, tilting his head all choked up and speechless, looking in Chu Wanning’s direction with an empty daze.

Elder, I have wronged. I shouldn’t have used you as a wager, sir. I’ve lost so hard that I don’t even have the money to buy this month’s spiritual stones anymore!

Just as he was pitying himself, all of a sudden he saw Mo Ran shift his arms and elbows, his giant build of a body leaning slightly forward, and said more things to Chu Wanning. Then, this disciple who lost so horrifically witnessed with his own eyes that their Mo-shixiong had once again picked up the beef brisket, mixed with some veggies this time, and brought it to Chu Wanning’s lips once more.

.....
???

This disciple was stunned—Did Mo-shixiong plan on feeding the elder directly?!

Obviously Chu Wanning was extremely uncomfortable with this as well, and he flat out knocked Mo Ran’s chopsticks away with his own chopsticks, his expression grave as he uttered three words.

Those lips were too easy to read:
Put it down!

But Mo Ran simply smiled as he put down the chopsticks-ful of veggies and beef, but it wasn’t into his own bowl but in shizun’s bowl. Chu Wanning had no choice and he heaved a sigh, then under the unnoticed watch of over a dozen eyes, he silently ate up those veggies and meat.

“.....”

The gamblers at this table were already dumbfounded watching this play out. The disciples who thought it was a sure win before were all eyes-wide and tongue-tied, the silver leaves in their hands slipping out from their grips.

And it was instead that chum who had his head down all shriveled up who instantly jumped up, completely revived with his eyes shimmering bright. He said enthusiastically, "Hahaha, what a turn around! How the tables have turned! Shige, shidi, sorry but those leaves still belong to me, hahahaha, I'm rich I'm rich, let's be again tomorrow, haha, let's do this again tomorrow!"

At the other end, the two master and disciple didn't notice any of this at all, and Mo Ran had his chopsticks raised, slowly eating the rice in his bowl as he watched Chu Wanning eat the beef brisket with his head down.

It was a bit warm inside Mengpo Hall, the sleeve of Mo Ran's left arm was rolled all the way to his elbow, revealing a stretch of long, slender, and sturdy arm, its muscles stirring, rippling beneath the honey-coloured skin. He ladled a bowl of soup, and while Chu Wanning wasn't paying attention, he added two several extra pieces of ribs, and with the meat laid at the bottom of the soup, they weren't easily noticeable.

"Shizun, why don't you finish the soup? It's good for warding off the cold."

"Plain soup?"

Mo Ran blinked innocently, "I think so? I didn't pay attention when I got it, I forgot."

Chu Wanning took a look at the surface of the soup, and there floated the crisp green leaves of baby bok choy looking mighty delicious, so he didn't decline and took the bowl, eating a spoonful.

"Is it good?"

"Not bad."

"Then don't waste it, okay?" Mo Ran smiled, "Eat up."

Chu Wanning gave him a flat look, "You have the audacity to talk about me? Don't pick up so many dishes for your meals in the future, making me help you share in the responsibility when you can't finish it all yourself."

"Haha, okay, then next time I won't take so much."

Mo Ran waited until Chu Wanning nodded before he picked up his own soup bowl. That soup is a bit too hot so he blew at the surface, and the dispersing steam softened the hardened lines of his face.

Hot soup was a magical kind of food; it was clearly only a bowl of boiled water with some meat, vegetables, and seasoning added, yet it could warm a person from the pit of their stomach to the depths of their heart. And to eat the same soup with the one you loved, that feeling of fulfillment, was like having thrown a small stone into a lake, and the ripples spread out wave after wave, shimmering with light.

Within this hard-earned peace of this life, Mo Ran unconsciously let out a soft sigh.

Turns out, the leisurely years, when having drunken, was but the taste of a bowl of soup.

For this bowl of soup, he once gritted his teeth and sucked blood, killed unfeelingly, and for the same bowl of soup, now, his remorse was bone-deep and vehemently anguishing.

He downed the soup held in his hands really fast.

Whether it be the uneasiness in his heart, or the uncertainty towards the future, or his remorse and guilt, he didn't want to think too much about any of it. He genuinely had too little of the good life, so little to the point where he needed

to fight and snatch for it day and night without rest. It wasn't that he didn't want to take his time to savour it, take it easy; he was actually really envious of people like Xue Meng who, because he was born affluent and noble, that he would forever be unruffled.

Mo Ran couldn't ever be at ease; the things he possessed were often so little that he was forever baring his teeth to fight, snatching things and scared his things would be snatched away, so he had no choice but to immediately wolf down and devour his everything. In this respect, he had practically kept the most primal of beastly instincts, feeling as though he could only feel safe when the food was eaten and hidden away in his stomach. That was what it meant to truly own something, and no one would be able to steal it away.

When he was little, he fought the other kids for food.
In the previous life, he fought the rest of the xianjun's for the world.
But in this life, he only wanted to fight for this bowl of soup.

He was aware he had done a great many evil deeds, and was afraid there would come a day when fate would be clearing his account. Thus, he only wanted to seize that pitiful small bit of happiness he owned and dash madly away, leaving fate far, far behind him.

Just like all those who had committed grave sins and saw the errors of their ways, hoping to start all over, while Mo Ran always smiled, he was never at ease deep down. He knew that "the good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil" was no lie. Whenever excitement died down, he always felt the peace before him was really fake, like a mirage, an illusion, and in the end he would have to wake, and return to that empty Wushan Palace that is without a living soul, return to the dungeon.

So, he wanted to eat a few more bites of soup before it turned cold.

Because then, if one day his evil deeds did catch up to him and he was cast aside by the world, judged by fate, and shoved once more down into the frozen, deep abyss, he could still go on by his lonesome on this hot breath alone.

"What's on your mind?" Chu Wanning asked him.

"Ah." Mo Ran snapped out of it and responded softly, then he smiled after, "It's nothing. I always space out when I'm full."

Chu Wanning glanced at his empty bowl, "All done?"

"En."

"You seem to really like today's ribs soup?"

"Haha, yea."

Chu Wanning took his bowl and said, "Then I'll go get you some more."

He quickly went off and returned, and sure enough he brought with him a giant bowl of meat soup filled the brim. After putting down the bowl, Chu Wanning pinched the lobes of his own ears with his fingers, warming his ears and lowering the temperature of his fingers at the same time.

He sat down once more, "Eat up."

"Take your time," Chu Wanning said, "There's more if it's not enough, no one is fighting you for it."

Mo Ran was moved by these simple words. He cradled the bowl, his thick, black curtain of his eyes dropped back down, and he responded with a smile that carried a slight nasal tone, "Okay."

Chu Wanning didn't know this, but in that instant, it took Mo Ran everything he had in this life not to have shed tears while holding that full bowl of soup, listening to that "There's more if it's not enough, no one is fighting you."

Chu Wanning had left for five years; he was tormented with self-blame for five years.

Then five years later, his shizun told him: Take your time.

Mo Ran's heart was suddenly in a lot, a lot of pain. The closer he became with Chu Wanning, the sadder he felt. There were in fact many things that if you didn't pay attention, you wouldn't notice the affection behind them. And now, he paid proper attention, and noticed just how tolerant, how warm and kind, how good Chu Wanning was in treating him.

He had actually wrecked such a person in his previous life.

What good was he in this life that he'd be able to stay by his side for always?

His heart was quivering, painfully struggling; on the one hand, he thought he should stay far, far away from Chu Wanning, thinking where did he get the face to face Chu Wanning and smile, to be good to Chu Wanning? Absolutely shameless!

But, on the other hand, he was constantly yearning, every second of everyday—Was this it? Could this be it? Their lives were still very long, could he redeem for every sin he had committed bit by bit, please?

I return from the mountain of corpses replete with sin.

With these hands covered in the blood of my previous life, I hold up this hot and mellow soup of this life.

I am willing to kneel for the rest of my life, return my soul to purgatory after death, only for the hope that you... are still willing to take the cup and give it a taste.

"Shizun."

Since who knew when, Xue Meng had come.

Mo Ran came back to his senses. In truth, ever since Chu Wanning died, he had spent almost everyday and every night in this self-blame and unease, and after having soaked in this kind of feelings for too long, his entire person appeared rather weighed down. To others, this wasn't a good thing, so he had been trying to adjust his emotions, and things had only gotten slightly better in the past year.

But occasionally, there was still a thing or two in life that'd stir him up; he would still sink into a quandary or self-hate because of a word of an event.

When he lifted his head and looked at Xue Meng, the glumness on his face was yet to disappear, and it gave Xue Meng a fright.

"Jeebus, what're you doing you mongrel, looking at me with those eyes? Do I owe you money or something?"

Mo Ran knew that his emotions were let loose just now and wasn't able to reign them in for the moment, so he gave a small, forced smile, "Stomach's a little too full. You've got something with shizun? You two go ahead and talk then, I'll go out for some fresh air."

"Ah no, don't go, sit down. This concerns to you too."

"Concerns me? What is it?"

Xue Meng gave a mystifying look, "Don't feel too down when I tell you..."

"Alright Xue Meng, just say it." Chu Wanning said.

"Ah-ah." Xue Meng had wanted to keep things in suspense at first, but when he heard shizun's order he immediately started, "It's like this. I've just received an invitation. Song Qitong is getting married."

Mo Ran's expression drastically changed, blood instantly draining from his face.

But this wasn't caused by Song Qitong, but by Xue Meng——In this life, Mo Ran was very well aware just what sort of character Song Qitong was, which was why he detoured around her whenever he could. He and she were clearer than the clearest water, and had nothing to do with each other.

But Xue Meng...

Why did Xue Meng think that he would feel down if Song Qitong was to marry?

Mo Ran's heart lurched all the way to his throat, and it only took an instant for his mind to think of that fake Gouchen who kept causing evil, the one who never floated to the surface of the water, that deeply hidden hand behind the scenes.

That person could very possibly have been reborn too, and if that was the case, then he knew perfectly well of Mo Ran's past, and knew of Mo Ran's past sins like the back of his hand!

With a blanched face, Mo Ran forced himself to calm, and only stared at Xue Meng with composure, "And how does that concern me?"

"Don't you know yourself?" Xue Meng looked a little perplexed, "The Rufeng Sect delivered the wedding invitation today, and that Miss Song also went out of her way to send you a letter. If you don't know each other, why would she write you a letter? Mo Ran, it's not my place to say anything, but when did you get mixed up with her?"

"....." Mo Ran's emotions were raging, hard to restrain, and it felt as if there were thorns on his back. It was a good moment before he replied, "Letter to me? Could she have mistaken..."

"Nope."

Xue Meng pulled out an envelope from his robes as he spoke, and slapped it onto the table in front of Mo Ran. "Written with To Mo-xianjun From Qitong in black and white, there's no mistake."

Mo Ran glanced at that envelope, his heart pounding like the drums, and countless thoughts had flashed through his mind.

This was indeed Song Qitong's writing, but why would she write him a letter before her grand wedding when in this life, they had only met by chance?

Xue Meng crossed his arms, looking quite upset, "Are you going to open this when you go back, or open it here and we all look at it together?"

"..."

Mo Ran tilted his head, and saw Chu Wanning was also looking at him, his straight, sharp brows slightly furrowed.

"You opening it?" Xue Meng was unbearably angry, he frowned heavily upon men and women messing around, so he was acting somewhat aggressive.

If things really were as he suspected, then he wouldn't be able to avoid it no matter what...

Mo Ran felt unsteady, his head swimming, even the fingers that reached out were cold. He didn't say anything as he silently took the letter and opened it.

Author's Notes:

Mo Ran: Shizun, have some soup.
Mo Ran: Shizun, eat some meat.
Mo Ran: Shizun, eat some fish.
Mo Ran: Shizun, have some dessert.
Mo Ran: Shizun, have some wine.

Fourth Ghost King: What's the difference between the protagonist and the supporting cast? It's that I'll get fat if I eat, but he won't get fat no matter how much he eats!

Mo Ran: That's not it. You're fat because you're an orange cat, that has nothing to do with being a protagonist or the supporting cast.

Xue Meng: Besides, Fourth Fatty, you're not the supporting cast, you're only an extra $O(\cap_ \cap)O$

Ch.147 Shizun, We Can Talk This Out

Inside the envelope was only a thin sheet of paper with a few very short lines written on it.

Mo Ran took a brief look and felt his lurched heart settle. He almost heaved a long sigh of relief inwardly before he realized that cold sweat had already drenched his heavy layered shirt.

Xue Meng moved closer for a look too.

"What the heck?" After seeing what it was, his brows furrowed deeply, "Why is it about something like this?"

"...What else could it be about? Didn't I say I don't know her that well?" After relaxing, Mo Ran let out a real chuckle, and put the letter on the table. "You made it sound so fishy, I actually fell for it."

Turns out, in the years that Mo Ran had roamed the land, he slayed plenty of evils of grave renown, and one of them was a carp spirit that had caused disasters at Lake Yunmeng for many years. Because it possessed strong spiritual powers and the place was remote, the many cultivators who went to fight it all ended up becoming bones it used to decorate its cave.

While it was said Lake Yunmeng was a place where the essence of evil permeated and it was extremely easy for monsters to cultivate into a spirit, a carp wasn't a creature known for its aggression after all, so on that basis, the spirit born from this cultivation shouldn't be that strong in its murderous nature. Mo Ran battled with it in over eighty rounds, and finally killed it with Jianguai. He sliced open its stomach and finally discovered the truth.

"That carp spirit had an invigoration crystal in its stomach." Mo Ran said with a smile, "This crystal was formed by the brilliant essence of the moon of a thousand years, a spiritual stone of the highest grade. It's considered the best of choice for forging weapons or cultivating the spiritual core."

"What does a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast like her want this for?" Chu Wanning asked.

"Said she wanted to ask it for her husband. Her husband has got a spiritual core with an attribute of fire, and he's been training too impatiently in these past years that he can be in the danger of qi deviation, which is why she wants to buy the invigoration crystal from me to bring it to him as part of her dowry, and help her husband suppress the essence of evil."

Xue Meng nodded, hearing this, "Spending a thousand gold if only for the peace of her husband, that's one in a million."

Mo Ran laughed at this, "Where'd you think she'd get the money? Doesn't she still have to ask it from the Rufeng Sect in the end? She's so beautiful looking, if she says a few words using her soft voice, her soft speech, how many of those shixiong shidi can reject her? Will *you* be able to do it if it was you?"

Xue Meng instantly glared, "Don't say it like I'm so perverted."

"Don't get mad, I was only giving an example," Mo Ran said as he returned this letter to Xue Meng. At Sisheng Peak, if letters weren't responded to, they were usually kept in the sealed chests at the library. Mo Ran said, "File it."

Xue Meng blinked, "File it?"

"Don't file it? You can burn it too if you want?"

"...No, but," Xue Meng was a little anxious now, "It's her grand wedding, she's asking you for a spiritual stone and not for nothing. She already said she'll pay any price, and she sounded fairly sincere, so why won't you sell it?"

"It's not that I don't want to sell, I have no use for it anyway, but I already gave it to you."

"Gave, gave it to me?"

"Yea." Mo Ran laughed, and pointed at the Longcheng sword hanging off of Xue Meng's waist, "Didn't I pass you a crystal a few years ago, and told uncle to forge you Longcheng? The Longcheng today is very different from the past, you wield it well, almost no different than you did the shenwu, and you've got that carp spirit to thank."

Xue Meng's mouth was hanging open, and he couldn't speak for the longest time.

"..."

He only knew that Mo Ran had obtained a gem while roaming the world, but he had never cared where that gem came from. There was always that bit of resentment he'd choked back towards Mo Ran, and it didn't matter whether the man was bad or turned good, he had always retained that sliver of indignance, that sliver of contempt.

So, when papa said the gem Mo Ran gave him could upgrade Longcheng, despite the gratitude, he also felt quite aggrieved, thinking that he'd received something good from his rival for no apparent reason, so he didn't want to ask about it at all, letting his dad take Longcheng to Taxue Palace for refinement directly.

Yet what he didn't expect was what Mo Ran gave him was actually a priceless "invigoration crystal". All of a sudden Xue Meng felt even more complicated, and couldn't quite say what it was he was feeling.

It took a long while before he squeezed out an insipid "thanks".

"You're welcome, it's fine," Mo Ran waved with a smile, "I just happened to have it at the time."

Xue Meng's face scrunched up even more at that, and he rebutted stubbornly, "I wasn't thanking you, I was thanking that dead carp spirit."

"Hahahahaha, then don't eat carp anymore to accumulate some merits for your saviour, yea?"

"Hmph!"

They laughed around for a bit, then something suddenly hit Mo Ran, and his dimples deepened, "Oh yea, I was so bamboozled by you earlier that I forgot to ask, who is Song Qiutong marrying again? Such a huge fanfare, she's only a little shimei but she managed to get the Rufeng Sect to send invites? Amazing. Is she joining a marriage alliance with the Bitan Sect?"

"No?"

"It's not the Bitan Sect?" I thought that since that old fart of a sect leader looked so pervy, the Rufeng Sect gave Song Qiutong to him, being such good friends." Mo Ran laughed, "Which clan is it then? To be able to associate with the Rufeng Sect and cause such a huge fanfare... It can't be Taxue Palace, can it?"

"What are you thinking!" Xue Meng gave him a glare, "Why did it have to be a marriage alliance?"

Mo Ran blinked, and his smile froze. "Who else can she marry then?"

"Nangong Si, duh! Did you forget? This wild horse of a gongzi of the Rufeng Sect has also reached a marriageable age. Song Qiutong is so beautiful, it's not a losing match for him..."

He wasn't done grumbling before Mo Ran abruptly stood up, and exclaimed in astonishment, "NANGONG SI?!"

Xue Meng was startled by his reaction, "What?"

"Why... Why is she marrying Nangong Si? How..." It was too shocking, turbulent waves were surging in Mo Ran's mind, unable to calm for the longest time, and he mumbled under his breath, "Nangong Si..."

It was no wonder he had such a reaction.

It had to be known that during this time in the previous life, Nangong Si had already died from grave illness!

In the past five years, he had focused his mind on the chaos of war and the refugees, he didn't pay any attention at all to the affairs of the prominent sects. The Rufeng Sect didn't interact with him very much, so naturally he cared for them even less. It wasn't until up to this moment when Xue Meng suddenly announced the imminent wedding of Song Qiutong and Nangong Si that he realized with a start——

This was wrong.

Everything was wrong. The fate of this world was changing, and it wasn't just happening to him, but even the seemingly irrelevant Rufeng Sect was changing.

The one who should've entered the coffin long ago didn't, and instead a funeral turned into a wedding, and the man was instead going to take his empress from the previous life as his wife...

This news was a little shocking, he couldn't swallow it and almost choked.

And, was Nangong Si blind?! To set his eyes on *this* woman??

But congratulations were still in order, and a gift still had to be presented. Since Nangong Si had extended an invitation to them, then what reason did they have not to go? The wedding was set for the fifteenth of this month; Xue Zhengyong had allocated all sect affairs and placed everything in proper order, passing on all matters to the two elders Tan Lang and Xuan Ji, then prepared to set off for Linyi.

Besides him, out of proper etiquette of the cultivation world, Madam Wang, Xue Meng, and Mo Ran must all attend the celebration. Other than them, Nangong Si also invited Chu Wanning especially, mentioning him by name, and

said he had received guidance from Yuheng Elder when he was young, so pray the elder grant him face and come. Thus, Chu Wanning had to go too.

"The Rufeng Sect is currently the number one great sect. It's the grand wedding of their young master, so every reputable figure in the world will probably come to give their congratulations." Xue Zhengyong said, "We don't usually mind the small manners at Sisheng Peak, but at an occasion such as this one, we'll still have to behave properly, lest we become a joke to the others."

"What proper behaviour?" Xue Meng asked, "I think I behave quite properly already."

Xue Zhengyong tugged at this hair and said, "For example, this crown of yours isn't right. You're wearing a golden crown."

"What's wrong with a golden crown?"

Madam Wang gave a gentle chuckle, "Meng-er, this is your first time attending a wedding, so there's much you don't understand. Mom will teach you, so listen carefully: at a wedding in the Upper Cultivation World, only the groom alone can wear gold hair accessories. If you go wearing a golden crown, then you're there to steal the bride, it'll be a huge joke."

Xue Meng flushed immediately, and he stammered, "Steal the bride? No no no, I'm not stealing any brides."

Mo Ran teased him, "When the time comes, are you gonna freak if we throw you and Miss Song into a small cabin?"

"You're the one that's gonna be thrown into a small cabin!" Xue Meng was both embarrassed and furious, "I won't wear the thing anymore, alright!"

"I don't think you guys are very clear on what is expected of wedding guest attires," Xue Zhengyong said, "How about this, I'll go have something made for each of you, and all you have to do when the time comes is to just put it on."

He paused, then made a point to look at Chu Wanning. He ventured, "Yuheng, is that alright?"

Xue Zhengyong wasn't fazed by the others, at most they'd cause some ridicule, but someone like Chu Wanning, the man was used to wearing white, so if he wasn't reminded, he just might show up at the wedding all in white. Nangong Si might spit blood from the outrage, and that'd start a feud between Sisheng Peak and the Rufeng Sect.

"Acceptable." Chu Wanning replied.

On the night before their departure, the evening wear Xue Zhengyong had ordered for everyone had arrived, and those clothes were all finished by dressmakers of Linyi he especially engaged for a rush order. The make was exact and proper, densely woven, and very pretty in design. Even someone picky like Xue Meng nodded in satisfaction when he received the clothes.

Holding a pile of cleaned garments, Mo Ran climbed up to the southern peak of Sisheng Peak, and came to the Red Lotus Pavilion. He called out in a sonorous voice, "Shizun, uncle had asked me to deliver you the clothes."

He came by the lotus pond and saw that Chu Wanning was practicing the sword.

He recalled Chu Wanning's second weapon was a sword, but that sword carried a thick killing aura, the impetus to destroy the world, so Chu Wanning rarely touched it. However, a blade unsharpened wasn't sharp, and a skill unpracticed was unpracticed, so even if this sharp weapon didn't have much

chance of being unsheathed, Chu Wanning would still take it out for a swing every so often.

The moon was biting cold, but perhaps he was warm from the sword practice, so the outer robe was removed, leaving only the white, inner-robe, the material of which gently flicked along with the night breeze, looking agile and elegant.

He didn't have his usual high ponytail, but had instead tied all of his hair into a stern and clean high hairdo, making his face appear particularly spirited, but also leaner. The longsword cried liberally and the blade was like snow; in his sword dance, there was softness in the strength, in his leap, there was grace. When flakes of frost were flicked up, they were as light as the lotus reflecting upon water, and when a move was flashed out like cold lightning, it was as if a dragon had broken through air; a swing a slackening, a withdraw a release, every point was on point; Mo Ran stood there watching from afar, but couldn't pick out a flaw at all.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning's brows stiffen; the longsword was pointed towards the centre of the lotus pond, the move was swift and fierce, and the waters of the pond was split into two by the aura of the sword, and from the sharpness of that blade, it couldn't close the gap for a long time——Drawing the sword to split the waters! The tips of his toes lightly dotted the waters as he sprung, airily and elegantly as he flew past the ripples he caused, his arms widespread, the white sleeves fluttering, and he landed gracefully in the gazebo of the opposite shore like a divine being.

“Shizun!”

Mo Ran was afraid Chu Wanning would take another leap and go off again, so he quickly ran to the gazebo and called after him. The bright moon is hung high in the sky and the night is slightly cool. White petals as gentle as snow were fluttering down from the large haitang tree next to the gazebo; Chu Wanning was stepping on the tip of the gazebo roof, his sleeves draping out, letting the moonlight as white as jade leak in. When he heard the call, he looked down, his eyes black and bright. He was gasping lightly, his lips red from the sword dance, a rare, ravishing sight.

“Why have you come?”

The night breeze was blowing at the loose strands of hair at his forehead, and he squinted his eyes.

“To deliver your clothes. Try them on to see if they fit?”

Chu Wanning humphed lightly, then all of a sudden he remembered that Mo Ran was also titled a zongshi by the world now. Ever since he had awakened, he had never sparred with the man. Something unconsciously stirred in him, and in the split second the thought had hit him, his person was already landing elegantly upon the ground. He let out a low cry, “Why don't you try and see if you can take my attack first!”

Ch.148 Shizun, A Natural Tease

Mo Ran was taken aback; he had never thought Chu Wanning would come swinging at him and he quickly dodged as the tip of the sword brushed past his chest.

“If shizun wanted to spar with me, at least try the outfit first beforehand. Uncle is still waiting to hear back from me.”

“Spar first, clothes after.”

“Uncle is in a rush, the tailor is still at the palace, if there’s anywhere that doesn’t fit right it’ll need to be fixed.”

“Then come at me.”

“.....”

This was something Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were rather alike, both of them were people who once the desire to fight rose it’d be hard to squash. In between the time the two spent talking, the longsword had already struck at a number of Mo Ran’s vital points, and it was thanks to Mo Ran’s relentless training that he was able to dodge in time. Otherwise, he’d be okay but a thousand holes probably would’ve been pierced by Chu Wanning.

The body of the sword forcefully tapped on the tip of Mo Ran’s shoulder, but Chu Wanning held back in time and only struck him with the side of the blade. He provoked with a jeer, “Mo-zongshi, is that the best you’ve got?”

Being cornered by this man and nowhere to put down the clothes in his hands, Mo Ran smiled miserably, “Shizun doesn’t plan on going easy on me anymore, and wants to bully me instead?”

Chu Wanning’s gaze was as piercing as the blade, and his sharp brows furrow slightly, “Did you think I would go easy on you forever?”

“Haha, that’s true.”

“...Are we doing this or not?”

“Ok ok ok, I’ll fight, I’ll fight alright?” Mo Ran chuckled and shook his head, then a light flared from the tip of his finger, “Jiangui, come!”

Jiangui answered the call and emerged, but since Chu Wanning was holding a mere ordinary weapon, Mo Ran didn’t inject any spiritual powers into Jiangui. He had only just gripped the willow vine when the sword came striking again down his front. Mo Ran jerked a few steps back then suddenly whipped out the willow whip, and it wrapped around the hilt of Chu Wanning’s sword. Chu Wanning didn’t care however, and he tugged with a twist of his wrist, pulling free of the bind, his form devilishly fast as he flashed behind Mo Ran. The long blade snapped back and was pressed against Mo Ran’s neck from behind his head.

Chu Wanning was pinned behind him, somewhat gloomy, “You weren’t concentrating. Again.”

His soft and warm breath brushed against the tip of Mo Ran’s ear, and a sudden wave of heat surged up in Mo Ran’s chest. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down against the blade, then he chuckled darkly, “Shizun, don’t be so sure so soon. Look carefully. Was I really not concentrating?”

At his words, Chu Wanning was suddenly shocked to realize that somehow, Mo Ran’s willow vine had already wrapped itself around his arm, and had restrained him firmly on the spot without the ability to move a single limb.

Chu Wanning stared at his own arm for a moment, then all of a sudden and sharp light flashed from his eyes.

“Hm? Not bad, I take my words back.”

Mo Ran grinned, “You can’t take it back just like that?”

“What do you want then?”

“I want shizun to go change.”

Chu Wanning humphed, “...Maybe when the winner’s determined.”

As he spoke, he injected his own fierce spiritual powers into his right arm, and Jiangui was forcibly driven back. Then with a violent tug, he pulled some distance away from Mo Ran while at the same time, the glint of a sword flashed past, and the aura of the sword was roused as it slashed towards Mo Ran.

Mo Ran had no choice but to raise the whip to go against the attack, and for a time, the willow vine and the sword clashed soundly in the air. Neither of the weapons were fed spiritual powers, so there was none of the majestic sight of sparks from the clashing of spiritual current, yet every move was a pinnacle move, flowing as smoothly as water, and one of Mo Ran’s arms still held the formal robes that Chu Wanning was to try. And so, Chu Wanning also kept to using only his right hand to spar, and in the blink of an eye, the two had already exchanged hundreds of moves, unexpectedly matched in strength, difficult to tell who was the superior.

Chu Wanning’s breath was labored; a drop of hot sweat dripped down from his ink-black, sharp brow and came down straight for the eye. However, he was in the middle of competing with Mo Ran, not to be distracted for even a second, and so that drop of sweat penetrated through his lashes and seeped into the corner of his eye. Amazingly, he endured it and did not blink, his pair of eyes blazing as brightly as fire in the night, flashing with a terrible gleam.

Beidou-xianzun’s combative nature was thoroughly incited by his own disciple. He had always enjoyed a good, hearty fight and competition, and he only appeared so cold and aloof because a good match was hard to come by. However, Mo Ran was like a torch, roaring as this pool of hard liquor called Chu Wanning was set ablaze, instantly lighting up the infinite skies.

Towards the end of the fight, the longsword surprisingly let out an ominous crackling sound because it was unable to withstand the high pressured attacks, and in the end, as the two lunged at each other in midair, it groaned and shattered into thousands of crystal fragments between the two great zongshi’s.

“Even the sword is broken now,” Mo Ran said exasperatedly, “Are we gonna keep going?”

There was nothing but the entwining smoke of ignited beacons in Chu Wanning’s eyes, and he tossed the hilt aside, his white robes slightly opened, further outlining his tall and straight form. He said simply and emphatically, “Yes.”

“...”

Before Mo Ran had the time to put Jiangui away, Chu Wanning had already come lunging straight for Mo Ran, his form keen like pulling a bow full taut and shooting an arrow, but also like the preying leopard in the jungle, the hawk within the snowstorm. Mo Ran hastily withdrew Jiangui and raised and crossed his arms to block. The two then engaged in a new method of fighting to be top, fighting so hard they loathed to part from one another.

Close hand-to-hand combat was different than a battle of weapons; oftentimes those who were bigger in build could more easily get the upper hand, nevermind that Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were already pretty evenly matched in skills, so in this round, Chu Wanning obviously got the short end of the stick.

Mo Ran chuckled, “Shizun, stop now. If you don’t use your spiritual powers, then honestly, you can’t beat me.”

Chu Wanning was furious, “You arrogant, unruly disciple!”

“Not at all, not at all, if shizun is mad, I can yield ten moves to shizun.”

“MO WEIYU!” Chu Wanning flew into a rage from the humiliation, and his fists and kicks became faster and more aggressive.

A whirl of haitang petals fell in succession, soft like snowflakes blown by the wind. Beneath the tree, the two master and disciple attacked each other relentlessly with roundhouse kicks, using every technique they knew. Another eighty some rounds later, Chu Wanning gradually felt his strength sapping—— He had already practiced the sword for an hour before Mo Ran came, then later fought with Mo Ran for over a hundred rounds using a weapon, so he really was already very tired.

However, his eyes were bright, and his heart was racing too. His handsome face showed nothing but spirit and light.

The more they fought the more entangled they became, and the wrestle for dominance was locked in stalemate. All of a sudden, Chu Wanning shifted and used his elbow to strike at Mo Ran’s ribs, but he was caught by Mo Ran.

The two pressed against each other, both their arms shaking...

Chu Wanning’s arms were gripped so tightly by Mo Ran that it felt as if the rough and long fingers were going to crush him, crush him to the bones.

Mo Ran’s beastly nature and the desire to conquer were also beginning to burn in this tussle between the bodies. He suddenly exerted force, and finally restrained Chu Wanning’s spiritual powers, then all of a sudden he turned his hand——

Chu Wanning jerked in shock, but before he realized it he was already firmly reined in Mo Ran’s sweat-soaked embrace.

“Are we gonna keep going?” Behind him, Mo Ran’s voice carried a smile, and his back was firmly pressed against Mo Ran’s broad chest. His heart thumped; the chest of this young man was as scalding as fire, as firm as iron, just like the molten lava, trying to swallow him whole, melt him. Mo Ran’s lips were pressed by the back of his ear, the heated breath exhaled from his mouth was spilled all over his naked nape, and since Chu Wanning had up a high hairdo, there was no hair obstructing the way, making him feel more keenly this terrifying, beastly breath, this male scent that was practically going to rip him apart like this.

Because of the sweat, in that violence there was the stickiness of entanglement, as wet as lust...

“Shizun, are we going to keep going?”

“...” Chu Wanning bit down hard on his bottom lip as scarlet red crawled up those phoenix eyes.

Fuck, he refuse to give in!

He was about to fight back when Mo Ran’s lips suddenly pushed down in this moment, and seemingly a coincidence, those lips rubbed faintly past the tip of his ear, and that rough and hot feeling made Chu Wanning erupt in goosebumps, his hairs raised down his back, and he clenched his teeth, “Let me go!”

While his words were aggressive, his body was softly trembling uncontrollably in Mo Ran’s arms, and fortunately, because the sparring drained him, Mo Ran couldn’t tell why exactly he was shaking. And the truth was, Mo Ran was barely able to keep himself in check, so he didn’t have the mind at all to notice anything amiss with Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning heard him open his mouth, his voice dark and cracked, much like the sound of thick affection with a teasing light chuckle, "When I let go, will shizun return to the room to change then?"

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes reddened from this stimulation, and he exclaimed furiously, "...Let go!"

His shying away only brought on a harder grip from the other, an even rougher clamp down, so much that Chu Wanning's arm was going to be dislocated. His body fell pliant, and in this position, in spite of himself, he accidentally let out a hoarse, soft moan.

This sounded too much like the moaning in bed, and Mo Ran froze violently, his lower regions immediately reacting. His and Chu Wanning's bodies were firmly pressed together right now, he was terrified shizun could instantly notice his hot and stiff erection. As if Mo Ran dared let Chu Wanning find out! He pushed Chu Wanning away almost in pure instinct, no longer daring to suppress the other from behind like that.

It was in that split second when Mo Ran dropped his hands that Chu Wanning broke free and stood there raging while holding the arm that was in pain from the grip. He whipped his head around and gave a hard, violent kick, using all of his strength, and sent the unsuspecting Mo Ran to the ground. Mo Ran wasn't expecting this guy to suddenly kick back and was completely stunned, lying there on the ground feeling as if his ribs were broken, and he frowned in pain.

"Shizun, that was..."

That win was a little dirty.

But he didn't dare say that out loud. Mo Ran arduously squinted the eyes that were now watery from the pain, trying his best to raise his head to look at Chu Wanning.

What he saw was his shizun with his inner robes in disarray, the white silk collar pulled open widely from the aggressive tussling, revealing a field of firm and smooth chest, rising up and down from the gasping breaths. Panting, Chu Wanning yanked close the disordered lapels, the hairs around his forehead scattered, the hairs around his face loose, and because the match was so intense, the corners of his eyes were still laced with a little bit of red.

Chu Wanning slowly straightened, then glared down at him from above, his chin slightly raised, his eyes burning darkly, mighty and proud.

Once his breathing calmed, he said, "You've lost. It didn't matter if you're tall."

Feeling conflicted, when Mo Ran spoke, there were even bits of blood bubbling up to the corners of his mouth still, "Yea, I've lost, haven't I? Even my bones are going to break from shizun's kicks."

"..."

At his words, Chu Wanning felt a little guilty. He was so into fighting just now, he didn't remember whether he held back in that last kick. He went over and bent down, prodded Mo Ran's ribs and asked, "Where did I kick you?"

"Here..."

"Does it hurt?"

"..." Of course it hurt, but he wasn't some fifteen, sixteen year old teenager now, what form is there to cry out to shizun?

Chu Wanning noticed his face was somewhat ashen, so he reached out to take that set of clothes while his other hand strained, thinking of pulling Mo Ran up to assist him. Yet it never came to him that his own energy was too overly drained, and Mo Ran was both heavy and big, so he didn't succeed in pulling the man up, and instead, he fell on top of Mo Ran. He heard the man under him let out a muffled, pained humph and quickly sat up. Without thinking too much, he went to check on Mo Ran's condition.

"Are you alright?" Chu Wanning's face paled.

Mo Ran's brows were furrowed, and put his hand over his eyes, "Move off of me first."

Thank goodness, he could still speak, so it didn't seem he was crushed to death.

Chu Wanning immediately tried to get up, but someone who was totally spent often wasn't able to get up so quickly once they fell, their legs were actually limp, and oftentimes not too stable. He didn't manage to stand, and fell back in a bit of a fluster.

This fall really didn't land in the greatest of places. It was right on Mo Ran's lap. Chu Wanning didn't notice at first, but he was presently dressed very little, there was only a thin layer of silk fabric, and this position was so awkward that the moment he moved, he instantly felt something big and hard press on him from below like a sword pulled at the ready.

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre: Mo Ran's Way of Playing Cute

Chu Wanning: Come, let's spar.

Mo Ran 1.0: nope nope, I can't beat shizun, even if shizun gives me 10 moves head start I still can't beat shizun QAQ

Chu Wanning: Come, let's spar.

Mo Ran 2.0: What happens if I lose? If I lose then let me take good care of shizun? ^ _ ^

Chu Wanning: Come, let's spar.

Mo Ran 0.5: (Pondering look) You still have the energy to fight? Yesterday, have I not... bullied you enough?

Ch.149 Shizun, I Can't Stand Up

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran: "....."

It was practically a flurry, Chu Wanning didn't know where he got the strength from either, but he jolted to his feet, his lips trembling minutely, his face going dark and pale and flushed in turn, looking as if he was extremely shaken but also frightened.

The mighty and powerful Yuheng Elder was actually, genuinely, frightened?

Mo Ran was instantly disconcerted, incredibly anxious, and he sat up, holding the spot of his chest that was kicked and was now in pain. He ventured tentatively, "Shizun..."

It was as if Chu Wanning had his tail stepped on, and he took a huge step back.

Must've been hard work, to be able to bulge those phoenix eyes into round circles.

Seems he really was wickedly startled...

Mo Ran smiled wryly, "Sorry, I'm not... I..."

But he didn't know what to say either.

Chu Wanning thought, the thoughts in his mind raged like the ravaging waves; I what? I'm not what? Why would Mo Ran have such a reaction? Was he himself the one mistaken? But if that wasn't a reaction, then was Mo Ran normally that hard and that big? Then how big...

That god forsaken ranking violently came to mind again, written with those two words.

Absolute Unit...

Chu Wanning's entire face flushed bright red. He noticed Mo Ran wanted to say more and he jerked his hand up. "Don't say anymore. Go back."

Mo Ran thought he made him upset, so why would he stick around? Enduring the pain, Mo Ran crawled up, but when he rose kept to a half-kneeling posture, and mumbled, "Shizun, I'm sorry, it was an accident."

"..." Chu Wanning looked at him with a complicated expression, looking as if there were many things running through his head, but truthfully, he wasn't thinking about anything. His brain was already stuck on the words "Absolute Unit" and no longer able to spin.

Mo Ran left, and Chu Wanning stood there rooted for a long time.

The thin hairs on his arms were standing, and his entire person was both a little blank and somewhat dazed.

Suddenly, he remembered a long time ago when they sought for swords at Jincheng Lake, when they were at the hot springs Mo Ran had accidentally slipped. At that time, the boy had also touched him due to a series of unexpected events, but the physical contact didn't last for long, and Chu Wanning wasn't sure if he was mistaken. But just now, Mo Ran had uttered a sorry from his lips, that it was an accident, which meant that just now, he really did... become aroused... it wasn't his imagination.

Although he knew it was perfectly normal that males would sometimes become aroused from the sights they saw, yet when Chu Wanning reflected on himself, he didn't think there was any part of him that's attractive at all. There were plenty of people more handsome than he in the world, could Mo Ran like his sweaty and disheveled form?

...What's so good looking about that?

Nonetheless, as confused as he was, that hair-raising feeling between his legs still wouldn't die down for the longest while, and even with clothes in between, it still felt so alive, so ferocious.

In that mess of thoughts, something out of place suddenly came to mind.

He couldn't help but think: Such a ferocious beast, if it was let loose, who would be able to take it...

Chu Wanning bit down on his lips dejectedly then clenched his teeth, yet the flush on his face refused to fade, and the pair of phoenix eyes remained both unfocused and utterly confused.

It was like a fever, like he was wrapped by searing fire.

He stood out there for a long time before returning to his room. Chu Wanning let down his hair, biting the ribbon between his lips, and raised his hands to gather his long hair anew then bound it tightly, tying a ponytail.

He sighed a breath, then raised his eyes to see himself in the mirror.

Sharp and narrow phoenix eyes, giving off the impression of absolute authority and fierceness when he didn't smile. Unlovable.

His nose ridge wasn't considerably high, the arch gentle but the form wasn't vivid. Unlovable.

His mouth...

Forget it. This mouth was exactly the same as the words uttered by the same mouth, both very unkind, cold and aloof without any temperature. Of course it was also unlovable.

Who knows what mind Mo Ran lost that roused that kind of fervor.

Chu Wanning had always been extremely conservative and obstinate when it came to matters of love, he knew very little of it, and simply touching debauched literature would make him think he'd dirtied his hands, so even after staring and pondering at the mirror for a long time, he still couldn't figure anything out.

Whatever.

Don't bother with it then. Yuheng Elder who had never had any experience in love told himself: it wasn't like men only reacted when lust overtook the body, maybe it was only a coincidence.

The next day, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang stood before the mountain gate bright and early in the morning, waiting for the other three who would be attending the banquet to arrive. The first to come was Xue Meng. He normally wore the blue and silver soft armour of Sisheng Peak that somehow always appeared poignant in endowment.

However, today he wore an elegant and solemn formal robe, and his hair was also done simply with a jaded hairpin, presenting him with a different air, appearing poised and stately, his shoes refined and tasteful.

When he saw his parents, he was actually a little embarrassed, and he tugged at his own sleeves before speaking up, "Papa, mum."

Xue Zhengyong couldn't help but praise, "Meng-er looks so good, you and your mom are practically made from the same mold."

Madam Wang had her beautiful eyes lowered and she was blushing a little, probably from her husband's compliments.

She waved at Xue Meng and said, "Come, Meng-er, come over here."

Xue Meng stood before her and she tilted her head up, staring at him for a while. In her eyes there seemed to be imperceptible passing of time. A moment later, she let out a soft sight, "This outfit suits you, it makes you look fair. Quite lovely."

Xue Meng smiled at this, "Isn't it because I was born this way thanks to mum?"

"Listen to your cheekiness, exactly like your dad." Madam Wang said, feeling amazed, "Over twenty years have passed in the blink of an eye..."

Xue Meng seemed to have sensed what she was going to say next, and all of a sudden his smile froze, unconsciously taking a step back.

But what good was this half a step back? He still couldn't escape his mother's nagging.

Sure enough, in the next second, Madam Wang pulled him over and started earnestly, "Meng-er, we're setting off for the Rufeng Sect today to congratulate

Nangong-gongzi. Look at it, you're pretty much the same age as him, isn't it time for us to discuss *your* marriage?"

"Mum, I haven't thought about starting a family yet... I don't have anyone I like..." Xue Meng grumbled.

"Mom knows you don't have anyone you like, so take this outing this time as the chance to pay more attention to the girls. She doesn't have to be from any major wealth or some great beauty. As long as her character is not bad and you fancy her, then mother I will definitely plan everything perfectly for you, and send a matchmaker."

Xue Meng was blushing now. "The bazi^[7] hasn't even been looked at yet, how did you jump to matchmaking already?"

"Mom is only making a mention...."

"But I'm not interested in anyone. Take the girls that we've seen in the Upper Cultivation World for example, mum, not a single one of them is better looking than me. If I married one of them, won't I be the one losing out? I'm not marrying. Nope, not a chance." Xue Meng was shaking his head like a pellet drum, then a brilliant idea came to him, and he said, "Besides, why do you guys only bother me? Mo Ran is a year older than me, eh? Why don't you two worry about him? And my shizun——"

"What level do you think Yuheng Elder is? Can you compare?" Madam Wang found him funny, "Alright, I won't force you, mum is just talking, asking you to pay more attention. But if there really is no one you're interested in then it's fine. It's not like mom will tie you up and throw you into the wedding halls."

Xue Zhengyong however, pondered for a moment, then spoke up, "Well I do think Meng-er is right. I did mention the matter of a cultivation partner with Yuheng the last time."

"Huh?" Xue Meng was shocked hearing this, "Papa, you brought that up with shizun? He didn't get mad at you?"

"Of course he did," Xue Zhengyong smiled wryly, "He kicked me out."

Madam Wang, "..."

Xue Meng burst out laughing. "See? My shizun is a transcendent being, not a god but akin to one. Someone like him has already cut off all desires, what need does he have for a cultivation partner?"

Xue Zhengyong sighed, obviously not giving up, and was just about to continue arguing with his son when suddenly, Madam Wang covered her mouth with her sleeve and whispered, "Husband dear, don't say any more. Yuheng Elder is here."

Amidst the morning fog not yet dispersed, Chu Wanning slowly walked over through the trail of verdant flagstones still damp, his long, loose robe trailing on the ground, the robe itself a proper moonlight white with the hems embroidered with golden threads, flowing along with the moving of his heels as the golden threads shimmered faintly beneath the sun. His hair was bound with a white jade hairpin, and at the end of the hairpin sat a red jewel carved in the shape of a plum blossom. His entire person was pure and clean coloured with dignity, and in that detached coldness there carried a disdainful indifference.

At that moment, Xue Zhengyong suddenly felt weak and his jaw dropped, but then closed his mouth.

He thought, Xue Meng was right after all.

What kind of woman could match someone like him so as to not be drowned by his splendour, or be covered by dust in the wake of his imposing grandeur?

This god walked down to the mortal realm and stopped before the mountain gate. He creased his brows and looked at Xue Zhengyong.

"Sect Leader."

"Haha, Yuheng, the clothes fit you well, eh."

Chu Wanning raised a hand, and a sachet with extremely intricate embroidery and design swung in midair. "The sachet that came with the formal outfit isn't quite the same as the usual ones."

"Ah, it's made in Linyi styled knots, what about it?"

The divine dao Zhang who stood high above and out of reach from all furrowed his brows and said, "It's too hard, I don't know how to tie it. Will sect leader please grant guidance."

Xue Zhengyong, "..."

He taught Chu Wanning three times, but still Chu Wanning couldn't figure out how the strings were wound, and in the end he gave up completely. Xue Meng couldn't watch on anymore, and he took the initiative to go up and requested permission to help tie the sachet for Shizun. It took him no time to have it hung properly by Chu Wanning's waist, and Chu Wanning watched, a little surprised. He commended, "Not bad."

Next to them, Xue Zhengyong's mind couldn't help but turn back around and thought, dear lord, if someone like him doesn't have a cultivation partner, would he really not end up dying from lack of daily self-care?

A while later, Mo Ran had come too, looking kind of grim. That kick from Chu Wanning yesterday was too hard, but he was too embarrassed to seek medical attention, because there'd definitely be questions of how he was hurt and who kicked him. He couldn't just say he was kicked by Yuheng Elder because he trifled with him, right?

He could only meditate on his own and heal quietly, and he was finally a little bit better now. At least his chest didn't hurt to the point where it was difficult to breathe.

But when he saw Chu Wanning who was standing next to Xue Zhengyong waiting quietly for him. This man was wearing the formal moonlight white robes embroidered with golden threads, the collar high, looking both ascetic and dignified—What a respectable, handsome man.

Mo Ran felt something stir in his chest cavity, and the air that finally flowed in his lungs seemed to have been interrupted again, and he couldn't breathe, his breathing completely erratic.

"*Ahem!*"

Goddammit. He fell in love with a man he should never love and swore to never touch again.

The old spirit that was reborn twice was now like some unfledged twenty something little lad, young and impulsive, surging with hot blood, feeling as if the world was both ending and thriving because of one look or the change of an outfit of his object of affection. From now on, his happiness had everything to do with that person, his sorrow had everything to do with that person, his heartbeat had everything to do with that person, his breath had everything to do with that person, and even the moonlight shining in upon the windowsill illuminating the solitary ant as well as the stamen that attracted said ant had everything to do with that person.

In this love he felt tormented, very sullen.
Because every single petal, every single leaf was all that person, but he couldn't have him, he couldn't pick the flower.
God. Life is so hard.

After handing over all the sect affairs over to Tanlang Elder to manage, Xue Zhengyong took the invitation and set off with his wife and company.

With Chu Wanning in the traveling ranks, as long as there was no rush in the itinerary, they would usually ride the carriage, and this time was no different. The group went on their way in leisure, slowly as they headed down the official roads towards Linyi, stopping at various scenic spots along the way. When they encountered small-time demons and monsters, they'd exterminate them too while they're at it.

They traveled thus for over a dozen days before finally arriving at Daicheng City.

Daicheng City was known for cosmetics, and the moment they arrived in the city, Xue Zhengyong took Madam Wang to go buy products. Xue Meng scorned them for being an old married couple but still acted so clingy with one another, and he rubbed his goosebumps, refusing to go with them. Instead, he went with Chu Wanning and Mo Ran to go find a tea stall to sit for a bit to wait for mom and dad to return.

Revisiting an old place, all three of the master and disciples were feeling somewhat amazed.

Xue Meng spoke up, "Too bad Shi Mei isn't here, otherwise it'd be exactly the same as when we went to seek our swords six years ago. We could've gone to check out the top of Xuying Peak too."

Mo Ran grinned, "Aren't you scared that the fake Gou Chen would still be there, and would pull you back into the bottom of the lake to catch up?"

Chu Wanning creased his brows at the mention of the fake Gou Chen, "There didn't seem to have activities of him in the past five years?"

Mo Ran replied, "Hard to say. The past major disturbances are all unresolved cases. The ones that had to do with shenwu, I suspect it's him but I've no proof."

Xue Meng twirled the cup in his hand and looked at Mo Ran, "I on the other hand don't think those unresolved cases have anything to do with him. Think about it, years ago he went through great pains trying to find a spiritual body. If you were the wood elemental spiritual essence, then he'd grab you by the scruff and hurt you, so the one he's searching for should be a person, not a weapon."

Chu Wanning was pensive, "But in the past five years, there haven't been consecutive cases of living humans going missing."

Mo Ran propped up his chin, "I didn't run into any blockades or traps either. But there's also the possibility that he didn't know where I was since my whereabouts had been uncertain in the past five years."

The three fall silent, each deep in their own thoughts, until the boss lady came with their ordered tea and candied fruits. Xue Meng scratched his head, "Do you guys think that after having done so much bad, he might've burnt himself to death playing with fire?"

"....."

"Don't look at me like that, don't evil magic usually backfires easily or something?" Xue Meng grumbled, "Otherwise, how come there's been no great

commotions from him? It's been five years."

Mo Ran suddenly spoke up, "There's one possibility."

"What?"

"See, shizun hasn't done anything in the past five years either."

Mo Ran hadn't finished before Xue Meng hit him with a chopstick, "What are you trying to say? Are you suspecting shizun to be the fake Gou Chen?"

"...Can you wait til I finish?" Mo Ran griped in resignation, "I'm just giving an example. I was thinking that if those unresolved cases of the shenwu being stolen had no connections to the fake Gou Chen, then in the five years he certainly didn't cause anything great. Then, is there any chance that he'd be like shizun, where due to some sort of circumstances, like being hurt or some other reason, that he had to remain in a certain place and couldn't come out?"

Having said this, something suddenly came to mind, and he stopped.

"Shizun..."

"What is it?"

Mo Ran shook his head at first, appearing as if he couldn't believe he was having this thought, but then after a moment of hesitation, he still stammered out two words, "Master Huaizui..."

In the past five years, the other skilled fighters didn't know, but there was obviously one man who was trapped in the Red Lotus Pavilion like Chu Wanning, not having taken a single step of leave.

Master Huaizui.

But the idea was too great of an offence. Regardless of everything, Master Huaizui had once taught Chu Wanning. Mo Ran actually didn't really know how shizun felt about Huaizui deep down, and so he didn't dare to cross the line too much.

Chu Wanning replied, "You can cease that thought, it wouldn't have been him."

His tone was light and indifferent, but there wasn't any hesitation.

And so Mo Ran immediately nodded. Since Chu Wanning didn't want to talk about his past being a disciple under Huaizui, then Mo Ran would never force any questions.

He then continued his ponderings, "Then, are there any other skilled fighters who haven't shown themselves in the past five years?"

"Guyueye's sect leader Jiang Xi," Xue Meng answered, "At the Lingshan Conference, every sect leader showed up save for him who begged off saying he was ill. He rarely shows himself."

Mo Ran laughed in spite of himself, "He's your mom's shixiong, right? You suspect him?"

Chu Wanning said, "Jiang Xi thinks very highly of himself and never yielded Guyueye to be below the Rufeng Sect, so ever since Nangong Liu became the leader of the ten great sects, he stopped attending any of the gatherings, it's not just the past five years."

"Then there's no one," Xue Meng said, "Ay, whatever, forget it. If we can't figure it out then stop thinking about it. There's too little clues, my brain's

hurting.”

It just so happened that Madam Wang and Xue Zhengyong came back just then, it was getting late, so the five got ready to find somewhere to settle for the night in Daicheng City.

Xue Meng said, “I know of an inn that’s particularly nice, it even has hot springs we can soak in.”

Mo Ran, “...”

It was a no brainer which one Xue Meng was talking about, wasn’t it that inn they stayed at when they were younger?

Back then when they were soaking in the hot springs, he’d even brainlessly slipped and fell into Chu Wanning’s arms...

Having thought of this detail, he unconsciously cleared his throat softly, and silently turned his head away, not wanting the tiny embarrassment and anticipation in his eyes to be discovered, yet his heart involuntarily started to race.

Xue Meng was someone who, in truth, always spoke with some exaggeration. What he liked he’d praise with all that he’s worth and completely blind to the flaws, what he disliked, he’d trample with everything he’d got, beating it to death without giving any second chances. But as they say, fathers knew sons best, and Xue Zhengyong thought he could only trust half of what his son says. He turned to Mo Ran, “Ran-er has also stayed at that inn before, right? What did you think of it?”

Mo Ran cleared his throat another couple of times, and didn’t dare to meet his uncle’s eyes, “...It’s indeed not bad.”

“Then let’s go.” Xue Zhengyong made the final decision. Thus, Mo Ran’s hands grew sweaty, the tips of his fingers curling from the throbbing of his chest.

He bowed his head and en-ed, appearing fully tame and gentle, but the thoughts in his head were actually: could... he be like back then, and go soak in the bath with shizun again...

He subconsciously recalled Chu Wanning’s slender and delicate body within the steaming mist, the lines of his curves sharp and taut, filled with the tension that invited violation.

But if he really could bathe together with Chu Wanning, amidst that blurring steam, could he really hold back?

After discussing where to go, the others had all risen to their feet. Xue Meng had finished the peanuts in his hand, and he clapped his hands free of the crumbs, also standing up, then he turned his head to look at his cousin who was still sitting in the same spot with a puzzling face.

“What’s with you? Let’s go.”

Mo Ran’s expression was unreadable, and who knows if it was because of the reflection from the setting sun, but his handsome face seemed to be a little red.

He reached out and poured himself another cup of tea, determined not to stand up and continued sitting there awkwardly. He cleared his throat softly a couple times and said, “...We ordered so much and didn’t finish, what a waste. You guys go ahead first, I know the way, I’ll come once I finish the tea.”

Author's Notes:

Ahem, some of you should know this, but let me still give you a tl;dr. Males really don't only react when in lust. When they're excited, or in a very good mood, or even just out of the blue, they really will... ummmm...

While we're here, I suddenly remembered a response on Zhihu (kinda like Chinese version of Quora), the poster was a boy, and once during class he was called on by the teacher to go in front of the class to recite text. He felt mixed about it, and as he recited, for some reason he became erect. It was a summer day, said boy was wearing the summer uniform briefs so it was very easy to tell. The poster said he would never forget in this lifetime his woman teacher's sweet and awkward expression, and the blush on her face hahahahaha lights a candle!

Mini Theatre: Apparently Xue Mengmeng is Very Picky When it Comes to Finding a Match, as if There's a Throne at Home for Him to Ascend, So if the Other Characters Are to Change Their Sex, Would He Be Satisfied

Pretty chick Mo Weiyu (characters modified to a girl's name)

Result: Pass

Reason Xue Mengmeng gave: I can't marry my cousin.

Pretty chick^[8] Shi Mingjing (characters modified to a girl's name)

Result: Pass

Reason Xue Mengmeng gave: She's beautiful indeed, demure and sweet tempered too, and graduated from nursing on top of that. Overall not bad, it's just the bosom isn't big enough, and the arse isn't perky. The figure is somewhat lacking, so let's forget it, let me see if there are better ones. But let me save this chick's number anyway, so if there aren't anyone better I can consider contacting her.

Pretty chick Nangong Si

Result: Pass

Reason Xue Mengmeng gave: This woman must be the weirdest I've ever met in all my marriage matches. She has a bigger temper than me, said her family is the number one richest clan of Shandong, her dad is Governor Nangong, super condescending. I was talking to her, but she only cared about walking her dog, did she have to be so condescending like that? I'm also the only son of the Village Chief of Mount Shushan's Sisheng peak Village! The more I think about it the more pissed I get, why would I want someone like this. Oh yea, she also freakin' boasts her wealth everyday; said she drives a maserati every Mon Wed Fri, a lamborghini on Tues Thurs Sat, and on Sundays she rides her personal jet. This show off was worse than swaggerin mcswagger, I held back my disdain and tried to comment on it nicely: It's everyone's duty to conserve energy, a girl who cares about protecting the environment is the prettiest, but she dared respond with: Piss off, poor ass. Mutual unfollow. Jeezuz, I'll be unfollowing her alright! Let's see who can block the other the fastest! So annoying!

Pretty chick Ye Wangxi

Result: Pass

Reason: This chick is good in everything, perfect height, gentle personality, clean family background, and though she's not very good looking, she's not bad for spending life with. I already added her as a friend and was going to invite her out to eat malatang this week, you can fill your stomach with just ¥16, now don't think me stingy, I just wanted to see if she's someone who judges people based on wealth. I was worried that she only liked me because I'm second gen wealth, so I wanted to pretend to be a poor loser first. She did accept my invitation, but on the day of the date, when I sent Xiao-Ye jiejie a text, it came back with: The other party is no longer your friend.... Ummmmm, where did I go wrong? I only remember the night before, that materialistic gold-digging, swaggerin' mcswagger Nangong dropped a pic driving her car in her friend's circle, I commented on it then blocked her... But what does that got to do with Xiao-Ye

jiejie? Could Xiao-Ye jiejie be gold digger Nangong's side account? A terrifying thought QAQ

Pretty chick Chu Wanning (characters modified to a girl's name)

Result: Pass

Reason Xue Meng gave: My mama says women with ferocious looks subdue their husbands

Pretty chick Mei Hanxue

Result: Pass

Reason Xue Meng gave: She is very beautiful, and a little mixed blood by her looks, but I dropped her pic in one of my peers' groups, there's about over a hundred dudes in that group right, and all of a sudden over eighty of them popped out and said they've slept with her... I'm instantly shook. And the key thing is, she's my dad's friend's daughter, even now I don't know whether I should tell this to that friend of my dad's, and tell her to mind her daughter more? What to do, this is urgent, waiting online for a response.

The above is the matchmaking journal kept by the straight dude Xue Meng who has a throne at home to ascend. Tomorrow's mini theatre will update on how every pretty chick felt after meeting with Xue Meng.

Pretty chick Nangong Si: Thank fuck, that dude is a weirdo! Tomorrow! Let me rant about that fuckin' chauvinistic pig! I'm so pissed!

[1] Dog food is slang for PDA

[2] Qingming Festival, aka Tomb Sweeping Festival, a day where you go sweep the tombs of your ancestors

[3] [爱欲] Love and desire in one word, encapsulating all emotions related to profound love such as affection, romance, love, lust, etc. Ironically, the word is separated into two in English, so some of that meaning is lost.

[4] Euphemism for cum :)

[5] PIC - It's commonly known in North America as the bao bun, to make a Chinese Hamburger. I refuse to use those terms in this text.

[6] PIC

[7] [八字] Bazi are the eight characters that indicated a person's birthdate information for consulting fortune tellers. Before a marriage can be set, the couple's fortune must match, then the groom's family must send a matchmaker to seal the deal.

[8] Word used is "Little Barrier" but a pun to the word Pretty Chick

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.150 Shizun, Swap Rooms with Me

Speaking of this small town, it had become famous because of Xuying Peak, but after that fake Gou Chen affair where the weapons of Jincheng Lake had

been completely destroyed, the town had gradually become desolate as the years passed by. Many of the inns that provided accommodation for those who came seeking swords closed due to the slump in business, and switched their business to something else.

However, the inn with the hot springs that the master and disciples had stayed at was still stubbornly surviving. Because of Nangong-gongzi's grand wedding, many of the guests coming to Rufeng Sect to attend the reception would settle in Daicheng City first, and so this inn returned to its former glory.

Xue Zhengyong swept aside the bamboo curtain and stepped into the reception hall. "Boss, checking in!"

"For four?"

Xue Zhengyong hadn't yet answered when he heard a low voice from behind, "No, for five."

Turns out Mo Ran had hurried back just in time.

Xue Meng was a little surprised to see him. "So fast?"

Mo Ran blinked at first, then his face dropped immediately and he thought angrily, *does it take a long time for yours to go down?* It was nothing but a simple matter of reciting the mind-purification spell a few times while sitting there at the tea shop.

But he also knew that Xue Meng wasn't talking about the same thing and that he couldn't throw a fit, so he could only nod quite reservedly.

"You swallowed all the melon seeds without even spitting out the shells, didn't you?"

Mo Ran: "....."

"Lord customers, how many rooms do you need for the five of you?"

Xue Zhengyong replied, "My wife and I will share one, then three more of the bestest suites, so four in total."

Mo Ran listened to his uncle's arrangements with a calm and quiet look, but he was faintly restless inside. He had secretly hoped that the same conversation from the past would happen, that the boss would tell them that there was no vacancy and they'd have to squeeze, that way he could...

Forget it. Truth was, he still wouldn't be able to do anything. But just the thought of staying in the same room alone with Chu Wanning made his heart burn, made him both a little unsettled and a little thrilled. After all, the blood of predatory beasts flowed in his veins.

However, coincidences didn't happen that often in life, and this time, the manager quite happily answered, "Yessir, four suites!" He turned around and collected four keys from the cabinet, then shouted with a dragged out greeting, "LORD CUSTOMERS, SECOND FLOOR, PLEASE——"

Mo Ran gave him a deep, silent look, feeling somewhat glum.

Stupid, he thought, *what are you so happy over four rooms for? What's there to be happy about! What's there to be happy about! What's so good about making more money!*

"Ran-er, why are you gripping the counter like that?"

"....." Mo Ran maintained his composure as he withdrew his hands then flashed a smile. There were already several cracks on the bottom of that wooden board where he had been gripping, and had he used more force it would've shattered. "No reason."

After taking his key from Xue Zhengyong's hand and going upstairs, Mo Ran stopped in front of the door to the room assigned to him, taken aback.

When he turned his head, he saw Chu Wanning was also looking at him.

"You're staying in that room?"

"En... Yea." Mo Ran hesitated for a moment, lashes lowered at first, but then he raised his eyes in spite of himself, and those bright, black orbs gazed at Chu Wanning's face. "Does Shizun still remember?"

"...Remember what?"

Mo Ran pointed at his door and said, "That time when we came to seek swords, this was the room shizun stayed in."

"..."

Mo Ran watched him cautiously, forbearing his voice, but he couldn't conceal a flicker of hope. "Shizun, do you still remember?"

Chu Wanning thought to himself, *how could he not*.

As he climbed up to this floor, past events had been coming back to him with each step, creaking along with the stairs of this old building that had long since fallen into disrepair, and memories slowly emerged, carrying the decaying smell of wood soaked in the passing of ages.

He could almost see the young Mo Ran push open the door, still with a cynical and frivolous look on his face, and cracking a smile at him. His dimpled smile was light yet profound with years.

Seeing him silent for so long, Mo Ran seemed to appear somewhat disappointed, and he dropped his gaze. "Maybe I remembered wrong, mixed it up..."

"You're right."

Mo Ran's head shot up.

Chu Wanning gazed at him, then seemed to let out a faint smile, "You weren't mistaken, it was that one."

His words were like a spark that ignited the darkness within Mo Ran's eyes in a flash, and the corners of Mo Ran's lips slowly pulled into a sweet smile, almost as if he'd tasted an extremely delicious candy. He then pointed at the room Chu Wanning was to stay in for the night. "And, the room shizun is staying in tonight was the one I stayed in last time."

He was really happy so his words were honest.

However, that made Chu Wanning a little embarrassed, and his smile disappeared as he spat indignantly, "I don't recall that."

As he said that he pushed the door and went in, leaving Mo Ran outside.

"....."

Um...what had he done to upset him now?

Mo Ran didn't dare go to the baths to soak in the hot springs that night. In most cases, he wasn't afraid of anything, but for certain things, he was afraid of that one in a million chance. He felt he had now arrived at the borders of desire. If Chu Wanning were to give him the slightest bit of temptation, he didn't know if he could endure being a gentleman, could resist plucking this out-of-reach cliffside flower.

He lay there in bed, arms pillowed behind his head, incredibly bored, and started mulling over the way he and Chu Wanning had been interacting.

He wasn't a very smart person, and felt that Chu Wanning was like a big white cat, one that he wanted to treat well, a snow-white kitty that he wanted to take care of, but every time he tried to pet it, it only took a couple strokes before the white cat's claws would come swinging, as if he hadn't petted it comfortably, or the way it wanted to.

He felt himself at fault, but he really didn't know where he was allowed to touch and where he wasn't. He was like someone who had just started keeping a cat; all his knowledge was half-baked, and all that he knew to do was to push the white cat down and lick its fur.

Which would garner him an angry yowl and a swipe of the claws.

Mo Ran flipped over and blinked, feeling very depressed.

He suddenly remembered the floorplan of this inn, and the bed of the room next door and his should be pressed together, separated only by a single planked wall.

The moment this thought surfaced, there was even less chance of Mo Ran falling asleep. He felt his mouth go dry.

Had Chu Wanning taken his bath? Or was he getting ready to?

But he barely heard any movement from his room...If Chu Wanning didn't plan on going to take a bath, did that mean he had already lain down? Then that meant, they were actually very close to each other right now, and if it wasn't for that thin wooden board in the middle that divided their rooms into two, they would actually be lying beside each other...

Lying together. This thought alone made the young man's blood boil, flowing dangerously, like a volcano in shallow dormancy, not yet erupting.

He couldn't help but shuffle even closer to press himself firmly against the wall. At the end of the day, a wall made of wood was different from one made of earth; wooden planks were only so thin, at most three fingers thick.

Mo Ran thought to himself, Chu Wanning was lying there, only three inches away from him, stripped of his clothes, or perhaps only wearing a thin under-robe... He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He could feel his heart burning, scorching his entire body, blazing all the way to his eyes. His eyes weren't open, but if they were, they would be laced with red, bloodshot.

Ah. He then abruptly remembered another thing—Something so thrilling that his entire body went taut, his blood gushing straight down below.

He had once masturbated on that very bed that Chu Wanning was now sleeping in.

Memories of years long past were so wet, sinful and sweet. When Mo Ran recalled this, he could feel himself tense. That year, he recalled, he had gone to the hot springs and had accidentally tripped, falling into Chu Wanning's arms. That feverish feeling wouldn't fade no matter how much he tried, and he'd only been able to rub at himself, wallowing in his own decadence with his forehead pressed against the wall, releasing his desire that way...

Mo Ran cracked his eyes open a slit, his eyes dark. The pitch black was like rocks, yet with scarlet red lava surging beneath. He once again pressed his forehead against the wall.

It was as if his heart was going to burst. How had he been such a fool, it had been such blatant desire and love, so how... had he not noticed...

He placed one hand against the wall, trying to restrain himself, but he really couldn't.

When he'd thought he didn't love Chu Wanning, he could think about him and relieve himself without scruple. But now that he'd fallen in love, he was destined to never obtain that man on the other side of this divide no matter how

he wished, and even dreaming of it would feel dirty, like he was defiling Chu Wanning.

Forcibly holding back lust was truly pure torment for a young body so full of vigour. The tip of his nose pressed against the wall as he pushed all that he could of his feverish body against that flimsy facade, mind a chaotic mess. His eyes were lost and unfocused, and amidst this upsurge of passion that was swelling by the minute, an illusion faintly took hold of him.

It was almost as if Chu Wanning's breathing and that faint fragrance of haitang on Chu Wanning's body had permeated through the cracks in the grain of the wood, had seeped into his bed, enveloping him seamlessly.

Chu Wanning's scent was enticing him, pitying him.

It was tempting his beastly desires, and pitying his humanity.

It was luring him to self-combust in the flames of lust, and pitying him for what he wanted, but could not have.

Lost amidst this temptation and pity, Mo Ran's brows furrowed painfully and the hands supporting him against the wall tensed, the bones and veins standing out starkly.

In contrast to his ruthless expression however, were his pleas, near sobs, as he murmured softly, "Chu Wanning... Wanning..."

What he didn't know however, was that on the other side of the wall, Chu Wanning hadn't actually dared to go to the hot springs for a bath either. He was just as Mo Ran had imagined and had already laid down. at this moment, he was also thinking of him, yearning for him. Chu Wanning's long and slender fingers stroked the slightly cool wooden planks, his forehead also pressed against this heartless wall.

The misunderstandings between the two of them in the past life were so deep that it made them lose their way, and a tremendous abyss divided them. And so in this life, they used their own blood to fill this abyss, turn it into a sea of blood in order to ferry across to get to each other's side. However, because of this one barrier, they could not see the outpouring of love from the other, and so had no choice but to let their own love and desire wash over them, alone.

But they were so undoubtedly close already.

So much so that it was as if Mo Ran could hear Chu Wanning's heartbeat, and Chu Wanning could always hear Mo Ran's breathing.

"Dong dong dong!"

Startled, Mo Ran shouted irritably, "WHO IS IT!"

His shout also startled Chu Wanning next door, and instantly he realized that Mo Ran really had been sleeping nestled against the wall, pressed so close to him that this deep and hoarse voice seemed to have sounded right next to his pillow.

"....." Chu Wanning unconsciously clenched his fists, opening his phoenix eyes in the darkness.

"It's me, Xue Meng," the person outside said. "My mum said she put my belongings together with yours, open your door, jeez, I wanna go take a bath."

Eavesdropping was obviously not a good deed, but Chu Wanning thought to himself, I'm not eavesdropping, it's the planks that are too thin, the soundproofing of the rooms is terrible, it's Xue Meng who's too loud.

Either way, it wasn't like he wanted to listen.

Chu Wanning thought as he wrapped the blanket tighter and shuffled closer to the wall.

The creaking sound of the bed came from next door, and after a moment the door opened. Xue Meng's voice rose again, "Eh? How come you're sleeping already? So early?"

"I'm sleepy," Mo Ran was a little choked up. "Move it, you woke me up. Take your clothes and go, gogogogo."

"What's the hurry, jeez?" Xue Meng paused, then a trace of suspicion coloured his voice, "Locking your door so early and stifling yourself inside, acting all pissy so quickly, don't tell me you were..."

What? What was he doing?

Chu Wanning's eyes widened immediately, and his mind unconsciously wandered to when his and Mo Ran's bodies had rubbed against each other, next to the lotus pond. That youth possessed excessive vitality and high spirits, like he could kill, should he be ready to strike.

A young man who was just over twenty, he didn't practice the same abstinence method that Chu Wanning employed, so how much rolling lava was concealed in that body? How often did he have to release himself for it to be normal? Chu Wanning didn't know any of that, he had been ascetic for too long, this wasn't something he understood.

And now, he kind of wanted to know. But due to his face, he couldn't let go of his pride.

For someone who was so proud, who could he ask for a question like this? He couldn't possibly just pull aside a random disciple and say "Excuse me, sorry to trouble you, I want to know how many times a week do normal men in their prime need to relieve themselves?"

...Just the thought of it made him feel indescribably perverted.

Of course, at Sisheng Peak there were books related to dual cultivation and sentiments, but every book borrowed required registration on the logs, and Chu Wanning really couldn't imagine the following words appearing on the records:

《Legends of Bed Heroes》, 《Chronicles of Drifting in the Sea of Lust》
Borrower, Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning

...It would be better to just kill him.

Ch.151 Shizun, I Only Want You

>>sexual content, noncon flashback... txj's breeding kink...

In the midst of his wildly wandering thoughts, he heard Mo Ran speak in a low voice from across the wall, "Where do you think you're looking? It's not like that, take your clothes and get lost already."

Xue Meng replied after a pause, "Huh? Where'd I look?"

Mo Ran: "....."

Xue Meng stared at his cousin's face trying to figure it out for quite a while, then it suddenly clicked and he hollered in a mix of anger and embarrassment, "The hell were you thinking about! I was gonna say, the way you're in your room with the door locked and all, were you just going to make do with a bath in here cause you didn't wanna go down to the public baths and crowd around with everyone else. You're the one with your mind in the gutter, and you dare to turn it around on me?!"

In the next room over, Chu Wanning's face darkened.
Mind in the gutter...

Xue Meng let out a long sigh as he looked Mo Ran up and down, glaring the whole time, before saying, "I wasn't even thinking about that, but now that you mention it, were you——"

"...Weren't you going to bathe? What are you still here running your mouth for!"

"No but, like, I really think you're kinda suspicious you know." That unfriendly tone and those dark eyes practically crackling with sparks only made Xue Meng feel even more skeptical. "You practically lived at the brothels back when you first came of age, but I haven't heard so much as a whisper of your philandering ways these last couple of years while you were traveling around. Why'd you suddenly turn a new leaf?"

"....." Mo Ran seemed to be silent. Chu Wanning waited in the silence; he wanted to know Mo Ran's answer as well.

The longer the silence dragged on, the more anxious he felt. Why wasn't he saying anything? Embarrassment? Remorse? Or...

"You really want to know?"

Mo Ran finally spoke, the anger in his voice evident.

He actually had the nerve to be angry.

Chu Wanning was frankly impressed. He thought Xue Meng's question was perfectly reasonable; don't get all upset just because your unsavory past got dug up and try to sweep everything under the——

He didn't even finish thinking "the rug" when he heard Mo Ran say, "I've fucked enough and got bored of it, alright? Now kindly piss off."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Xue Meng: "....."

A long moment of dead silence, and then Xue Meng roared furiously, so loud that the entire inn probably heard, "Mo Weiyu, you shameless dog! Absolute scum!!!"

"Sure, sure, whatever you say. Now get the fuck out and let me sleep already."

"Don't you touch me! Gross!"

"How am I gross?"

"Y-you——" Xue Meng stuttered, his handsome little face bright red. He had set out to put Mo Ran on the spot, but unexpectedly had been put in the hot seat himself by Mo Ran's shamelessness. He couldn't help thinking about the fact that he was already in his twenties—in his age group, Nangong Si was marrying the number one beauty of the cultivation world, the fourth gongzi of Jiangdong Hall was already the father of three children, and that Mei Hanxue of Kunlun Taxue Palace...

Mei Hanxue, surprisingly, had yet to catch an STD and die.

It seemed that only he was still an inexperienced virgin. Xue Meng was indignant.

He wasn't indignant due to any perverted reasons, in fact he had no perverted desires whatsoever, but he felt like he was losing to Mo Ran in this aspect—not just by a little, either—and that was why he was outraged. If Mo Ran had avoided the question, if he had been ashamed, then Xue Meng probably

would've felt differently about this whole thing, but Mo Ran had only looked disdainful and impatient as he tossed out a——

"Fucked enough, got bored of it."

Little young master Xue couldn't take it, it was too much of a blow to his ego. He stuttered futilely for a while before roaring furiously toward Mo Ran, "Anyway, you're gross! You depraved piece of trash!"

And slammed the door on his way out.

Chu Wanning was a little lost for words as well, though he was more collected than Xue Meng and could tell that Mo Ran was bullying Xue Meng on purpose with those words in a moment of anger. But even still, he couldn't help the tides surging within himself, rushing torrents that refused to recede.

The man across the wall had used such crude words, spoken in a low snarl like that of a jungle lion, muscles strong and defined, hot breath steaming. The deep bellow and vulgar words combined into a hot, thick fire iron that jabbed right into his heart.

Chu Wanning swallowed, eyes dark yet gleaming.

Mo Ran had been admonished before for going to brothels, so of course he was well aware that Mo Ran wasn't some innocent like Xue Meng. It was just that the Mo Ran back then hadn't been so irresistibly alluring as to make him think about it, to imagine those kinds of scenes despite himself.

But now that it had been brought up again, Chu Wanning couldn't help thinking about that body he'd seen, that steaming, sleek, sturdy body amidst the foggy mist, the body that had once entangled with those delicate, soft, lovely youths, had once ravished those fair-skinned pretty boys.

He burned with anger, yet his heart felt as if tickled by a feather.

Steeped in anger and yearning, the corners of Chu Wanning's eyes grew reddened, a tinge of haitang in the darkness of night...

Xue Meng returned.

"Open the door!"

"...What is it *now*?"

"I got distracted arguing with you! Where are my clothes!"

"On the table. Get it yourself."

"Hmph!" Holding his clothes, Xue Meng left in a huff.

Things finally quietened down this time. Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran's heavy footsteps, followed by a muffled creak from the bed. This time, he really, unmistakably heard the man in the other room lie back down on the bed. He even seemed to feel the bed shake as it supported that solid, fiery body.

He felt parched, and wanted to get up for a cup of water.

But since he could hear Mo Ran lie down, he knew that that person would also definitely hear if he were to get up, so he stayed perfectly still, like a rock from Danxia mountain^[1], ice cold on the outside but brilliantly vibrant within.

Across the wall, Mo Ran was restless as well.

Men with unfulfilled needs tended to be irritable, and Xue Meng just had to pick that exact moment to pester him. He had lost control during the spat and ended up yelling something so shameless. He wondered if Chu Wanning had heard.

If he wasn't asleep, then he'd definitely heard...

He regretted it more the more he thought about it, rolling this way and that in bed. On the other side of the wall, Chu Wanning listened to the creaking sounds and shared in his unease.

A moment later, Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran say in a low voice, "Shizun..."

"!"

Unable to calm down even after all that tossing and turning, Mo Ran tried calling Chu Wanning to see if he would respond.

"Shizun, are you asleep?"

"....."

"Can you hear me?"

Chu Wanning's heart beat like thunder. Embarrassed about how loud his heartbeats were, he quietly tugged the quilt up over his head, trying to muffle the sound that the other couldn't even hear to begin with.

"Shizun..."

Under the quilt, with Mo Ran's voice so close, it was as if they were lying on the same bed, and that if Chu Wanning were to lift the covers, he would see Mo Ran's handsome face and bare chest, reclining sideways with his cheek propped up in one hand, watching him with those bright, pitch-black eyes of his, eyes that were bestial and hungry, as if he might eat him whole.

"Can you hear what I'm saying?"

Chu Wanning made up his mind to pretend not to hear; he knew well that Mo Ran was asking in the hopes that he couldn't hear.

Otherwise it would be awkward for both of them tomorrow.

Mo Ran called him a couple more times in a low voice, and then, hearing nothing from Chu Wanning's side, let out a quiet sigh. Thinking that Chu Wanning really was asleep, Mo Ran felt relieved, but also a little wistful.

He wanted Chu Wanning to pay attention to him.

But Chu Wanning paid him none, so he could only touch the thin wall between them, stroking it with calloused fingers, closing his eyes and pretending it was Chu Wanning's chest he was caressing, then pressing his heated lips against it, murmuring softly, as if whispering against Chu Wanning's lips.

Mo Ran said, "I don't want any of it anymore...I only want you..."

But he had spoken so softly that Chu Wanning didn't hear at all. Bundled up in the quilt, Chu Wanning's heart felt just as hot as his face. A few moments passed by before he heard a loud creak from the bed on the other side of the wall, as if the person on it was very agitated and rolled over angrily.

He said, "Fuck!"

Chu Wanning suddenly had a feeling, an animalistic sixth sense, that he was about to *hear* something. For an instant, all his hair stood on end and he wanted to cover his ears. But the tips of his fingers only twitched a little before drooping back down.

He stared blankly at the inside of the quilt at a loss. And then, a moment later, he heard it...

He heard Mo Ran's heavy breathing from outside the quilt. There was a rhythm to it, heated and vigorous. Goosebumps rose all along Chu Wanning's arms, the sounds making his very spine feel pliant and numb.

Mo Ran's panting was so sensual, so sinful, guttural noises that were stifled yet unrestrained at the same time. With sounds like these, there was nothing left for him to not understand.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He felt like he couldn't breathe, his lips parted slightly, trembling.

He remembered that erotic dream he'd had so many times before; in it, he'd seen Mo Ran's entire body, nothing left to the imagination. Closing his eyes only made it easier to imagine the scene outside the quilt. It felt like Mo Ran was lying on his back right next to him, firm, toned body stretched out, light dancing in those dark, narrowed eyes...

Mo Ran's hand reached down and undid his trousers, and that vigorous length sprung up. Chu Wanning didn't dare think too much about what the massive thing looked like, leaving it only as a rough silhouette in his mind, colored the hot red of arousal. Mo Ran worked his hand over that thing that could kill someone, the jut of his throat rolling every time he swallowed. There was no telling of whom he was thinking as he stroked his own cock, feverishly and painfully.

"Nng..."

The sound of the low groan from the other side of the wall, husky and sensual, made Chu Wanning's scalp go numb, those phoenix eyes hazy with lust in the darkness.

He also couldn't take it anymore...

After a long torturous moment of struggle, Yuheng Elder's fair, slender hand finally reached downwards and, trembling, wrapped around his own burning arousal.

That thick, hot feeling was shameful but also arousing. His head tilted back just the slightest bit as he suppressed a gasp. Under the cover of the quilt, he relinquished that exterior of cold virtue to drift in the sounds of Mo Ran's heavy breathing, allowed himself to be pulled into the ocean of desire. He treated himself roughly and clumsily, even hurting himself several times, until he really couldn't take it anymore and abruptly flung open the quilt. He got on top of the quilt, rubbing and grinding against it, long, slender legs trembling uncontrollably, phoenix eyes half-lidded behind loose strands of sweat-soaked hair, lips parted as he panted soundlessly.

Perhaps being suddenly exposed in the open air made the noises clearer, or perhaps the heady arousal made the noises blurrier, but he seemed to hear the sound of something wet. He thought it was coming from Mo Ran's side across the wall, but when he looked down, he saw wetness leaking from the tip of his own hardness, slicking his hand and making unbearably lewd noises.

Chu Wanning felt his cheeks grow even more heated. He turned his head away from the wall so that it would feel like Mo Ran was lying there naked next to him, that they were stroking one another, cherishing one another.

Loftiness and reservations long since forgotten in his lust-addled state, all he knew was the heavy breathing from across the wall and the intoxicating pleasure from beneath. His lack of experience left him defenseless against the carnal stimulation, and every inch of his skin felt like it was on fire. Like a well that had been dry for a hundred years longed for water, he craved the touch of another hot body.

As the panting from across the wall quickened, Chu Wanning felt like his heart was burning up and his spine was growing pliant, and his legs were on the very verge of giving out. The sheets beneath his body were already wet with slick. Blurrily, he thought that this was all so ridiculous, that he really shouldn't. But he couldn't help it, it felt too good; in all his years he'd never tried it, he didn't even know that anything could feel this good.

That time in Yuliang Village when he'd gotten himself off, he had felt tormented for having broken his abstinence for the first time, had loathed himself and been disgusted by himself, but this time——

Across the wall from the person he liked, listening to the sound of his stifled, erotic breathing, he suddenly didn't find these carnal matters so ugly anymore, and could actually allow himself to drift in the ocean of desire, to feel pleasure rather than repulsion.

A few strands of loose hair fell in front of his hazy eyes, watery and barely open.

His eyes grew defocused, and for some reason, a bizarre mirage flashed before his eyes.

Or perhaps it wasn't a mirage at all?
But rather the strange, too-realistic dream he'd had in the past.

The bedding in the dream had been red and gold, with an animal pelt laid out on the sheets that he could practically smell. And he'd been face-down on that bed as he was now, a sheen of sweat covering his forehead and lips slightly parted, hair similarly undone and draping before his eyes.

The candle had been left burning, and the man behind him had rocked against him, fast and rough, their legs tangled together. He could clearly feel the man's body, muscles taut with pleasure.

The sheets and bedding were already in disarray. The man had panted sensually and hoarsely as he thrust in and out, and he could hear him say from behind himself, "What're you holding back for? Make some noise for me."

Dream overlapped with reality. Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and tilted his face away, refusing to let out any sound even as the heat built up low within himself and the need grew nearly unbearable.

He closed his eyes, his hand below moving even more roughly.

He closed his eyes, but couldn't stop thinking about those erotic dreams.

The man had thrust a couple more times, then cursed under his breath and pulled out. He'd forced Chu Wanning to turn over, and under the candle light, he'd seen a handsome, lustful face. It was Mo Ran's face.

Seeing Mo Ran so clearly in the dream made Chu Wanning feel even more turned on and tormented. He shook his head shamefully, trying to free himself from the mirage.

But it was useless.

Beyond the wall, he heard the sound of Mo Ran panting.

Low and throaty, just like the cruel yet tender man in those dreams.

He even thought back shamelessly of the details in that dream, of Mo Ran flipping him over and pressing his still-wet cock against his entrance that was already twitching uncontrollably from being used, its massive head rubbing against his opening, dipping teasingly in but no further.

Inside the inn, Chu Wanning's other hand fisted tightly into the sheets.

Shameful.

It was too shameful.

How could he possibly dream of something like that?

He'd never... he'd never looked at any of *those* things... so how could he dream so vividly of it, as if this body of his had really experienced such fevered yet frenzied, ugly yet intimate things? Could this be the animalistic nature carved into the very bones of every human?

"Being stubborn are we? You really think biting through your lip to keep quiet will save your purity?" In the dream, Mo Ran's eyes had been glassy, and his expression had been sinister yet full of desire.

"How many times have I fucked you already, what's the point in struggling? You're the one that willingly let me fuck you, you're the one that willingly submitted to me..."

“Stop it...”

He murmured, in the dream and in reality.

“So what if you’re all noble and virtuous? Didn’t you still get dirtied by me in the end, didn’t you still take me into your mouth and suck me off, didn’t you still open your legs and let me fuck you, and wasn’t what leaked out from between your legs my gift to you? Pure? Don’t be stupid, that word’s had nothing to do with you since the day you went to bed with me.”

“Stop talking...”

Pure.

No longer.

Pride.

Ripped apart like his robes.

“You should see what you look like down here...” Mo Ran’s gaze travelled down slowly, like a dagger eviscerating the person beneath, until his eyes landed on that quivering, clenched hole, still sticky with fluids and blood from their previous joining.

His eyes darkened and the jut of his throat bobbed as he swallowed, then he cursed under his breath and took his engorged cock in hand to push slowly back in past that twitching hole, stretching the quivering passage within ruthlessly open, inch by inch.

It was strange, but lost in his memories of that dream, it was almost as if Chu Wanning really could feel a thick, hard weapon of flesh tearing him apart, filling him...

Mo Ran sank all the way into him, so deep that his balls were pressed tightly against Chu Wanning’s entrance, as if he wanted to shove them in too. The massive length filled him to his very limits, pulsating inside of him; he was sure that he wouldn’t be able to take even the slightest bit more of the violation.

“Ah...”

Was it within the dream, or in reality?

A moan finally escaped, jolting Chu Wanning out of his trance.

The mirage dissipated in an instant, fading away like mist.

The last thing he saw was Mo Ran driving into him, fast and rough, the two of them fucking almost frantically on the bed as he heard Mo Ran say, voice raw and heated between heavy breaths, “If you were a woman, you would’ve gotten knocked up long ago, the way I fuck you like this every day... heh, our child would be quite the abominable bastard, don’t you think?”

Shame, arousal; beastly desire, human nature.

Inside the inn, Chu Wanning turned over, trying to free himself of the filthy scene in his mind.

He felt wronged.

The rims of his eyes tinged red, he wondered—why was this happening?

He never used to have dreams like these. He’d never looked at anything he shouldn’t, he’d never even seen any pornographic drawings, so why would he have such ridiculous, shameless dreams...What was he going to do if anyone were to ever find out?

The memories of that dream faded away, but the bed in the other room suddenly began to rock. Mo Ran had been working over his cock for quite a while already before Chu Wanning had even started, and the heat had been building up this whole time. Close to the edge now, he couldn’t help stretching out his hips and jerking forward, and he’d gone so long without that he came with a low, guttural roar.

The stifled sound of that low roar went straight to Chu Wanning's loins. Eyes watery and red-rimmed, he stroked himself roughly, and followed suit soon enough, coming all over the bedding.

Never having experienced such an intense climax before, he couldn't help the low shout that tore itself from his throat as he came, gasping, "Nn...ahh..."

Vision all blurry after release, Chu Wanning couldn't understand how he'd managed to fall into this sticky, messy love, just like this. Unable to summon any strength, it was all he could do to lie there, eyes defocused as he panted quietly for breath.

He rejected carnal desires.
But he'd fallen willingly in love.

When desire and love wove together, passions of the flesh suddenly seemed less unacceptable. And so this time had been different from that frustrating, despairing time in Yuliang Village. He still felt the shame, but it was washed away by the tender feelings in his heart, covered up by the pleasure and arousal.

He suddenly wanted nothing more than for that wooden wall to vanish, for Mo Ran, sweat-soaked and panting like he was, to reach over and press his hot, heaving chest against his back, to kiss his shoulders and along his neck.

Chu Wanning lay there limply, staring off into the distance. He thought that, if only that were so, then everything would be perfect.

He would be content.

Mo Ran got up early the next day.

This was Linyi, Chu Wanning wouldn't like the food here, and the inn didn't have much in the way of mild dishes either. So he went to the western market and bought some ingredients, intending to borrow the kitchen to personally cook some things for Shizun.

In this world, there were men who would pull out all the stops to woo someone, right up to cooking up a full banquet for breakfast, but who would give up and walk away at the first sign that it wasn't going to pan out—after all, there were so many beauties out there, why would they waste any time on someone they had no chance with?

But Mo Ran wasn't like that.

He'd spent two lifetimes chasing after Shi Mei.

He'd finally figured his own feelings out now, and also knew that he'd never be anything more than master and disciple with Chu Wanning in this lifetime, but day after day, he still wanted to be good to Chu Wanning.

To be perfectly aware that he couldn't do something but to go ahead and do it anyway—in this, he'd never changed, in life or in death.

"Gongzi, out shopping so early? Check out my fresh carrots, why not buy some?"

"Gongzi, I have all sorts of jewelry here, bracelets, necklaces, hairpins, and accessories, you name it! They're all expertly crafted."

"Come look come see, all kinds of spiritual stones and weapons, come come _____"

Mo Ran was only going to get some groceries, but as he passed by a general store with his basket full of vegetables, he saw a bunch of pretty little trinkets laid out on a stand, of which one in particular caught his eye, and he found himself wandering unconsciously over.

There was another man at the stall, standing there with his hood pulled up as he looked over the glittering goods on display.

The man lifted a hand, revealing extremely pale but very smooth-skinned and pretty fingers beneath black sleeves. It was these delicate fingers that drew Mo Ran's attention.

Judging by the build, he'd originally thought that the person was a man, but then looking at the hand, they might actually be a woman instead.

Curiosity drove him to turn around to try and get a better look at their face, but it was covered by a layer of black silk. All he could see was a pair of cold eyes, hidden in the shadow of the cloak's large hood and barely visible.

Their eyes met. Mo Ran smiled at the person out of habit.

The other person quickly pulled back the hand that was about to touch a spiritual stone on the stand. Out of the corner of his eyes, Mo Ran caught a glimpse of a ring on the person's thumb.

It had a silver serpent pattern with intricate scales.

He felt like he'd seen this serpent pattern somewhere before, and was just about to take a closer look, but that person had already tucked his hand back into his sleeve. He shot Mo Ran an indifferent glance, then turned and left without a word.

"What a weirdo..." Mo Ran muttered. But then again, Rufeng Sect's gongzi was getting married, and wedding invitations had been sent out en masse, and all sorts of peculiar people had been gathering in Linyi lately, so it wasn't actually all that strange to see someone cloaked up head-to-toe like that.

Just then, the windchimes hanging from the little store's back door rang, and the curtain lifted and dropped as the store's lady boss came out.

Mo Ran tossed the matter of the black-robed person out of his mind and pointed at an enchanted item on display, smiling as he asked, "How much is this one?"

Ch.152 Shizun, Look! Mei Hanxue!

The boss lady had only just released the door bolt with a yawn and a languid stretch, preparing to open up for the day, when she suddenly saw with her bleary eyes a tall, handsome man standing at the entrance to her store, bathed in the light of the brilliant morning sun. Someone of such elevated bearing, posture tall and straight as a mighty pine, should be carrying a sword or blade while walking coolly through the city streets, heedless of one and all around him.

But this handsome man was smiling brightly, all soft dimples and gentle, thick eyelashes.

And in his arms he held a bamboo basket, filled not with spiritual stones or cultivation scrolls, but with fresh fruits and vegetables—vibrantly red apples, plump white radishes, and verdant green celtuce, leaves dew-laden where they peeked out from the basket.

Light dancing off the crystalline droplets reflected on his handsome face.

The boss lady froze mid-yawn as she stared blankly at this vision before her eyes of manliness interwoven with tenderness. She blinked, but couldn't snap out of it for the longest time.

"Boss lady?"

"Yes hello, what would you like?"

"These." Mo Ran picked up a pair of light red crystal pendants. "How much?"

"Gongzi has fine taste; these pendants are made using choice Dragonblood Crystal and crafted by artisans from Kunlun Palace. The materials may not be the most expensive, but the pendants themselves are quite special. Dragonblood Crystal, as I'm sure you know, becomes redder in color as the wearer's body temperature rises..."

The boss lady paused to smile before continuing, "Since you picked out a pair, one must be for your dual cultivation^[2] partner? Aiyo, I wonder which lady was so lucky as to claim your affections. Definitely get these, I guarantee you won't regret it. It's sure to be quite tantalizing if you both wear one when dual cultivating."

Originally, Mo Ran had only wanted to buy the pendants because Dragonblood Crystal had a warming property that was excellent for people predisposed to catching chills, so it would be perfect for Chu Wanning to wear during the winter.

But hearing the boss lady say that, he couldn't help his heart skipping a beat, thinking about the way Chu Wanning would look, dazed by pleasure with that pendant hanging from his neck, glowing scarlet from the heat of its owner's body, red as a bead of blood quivering at the tip of a blade.

He cleared his throat. "I'll take it. Please wrap it up for me."

In order to not arouse Chu Wanning's suspicion, Mo Ran bought gifts for Xue Meng, Xue Zhengyong, and Madam Wang as well. After getting back to the inn, he put down all the stuff he was carrying to take out the small paper wrap holding the Dragonblood Crystals from inside his sleeve. The droplet-shaped pendants had already turned crimson from his body temperature. He picked one to leave in the package, and hung the other one around his own neck...

Afterwards, he straightened his collar, making sure the pendant wasn't visible, then re-wrapped the remaining one.

He patted at his collar, and noticed that his heart was beating a bit fast. To actually feel flustered over a little secret under his clothes, after all the preposterous things he'd been through in the past life, even he himself couldn't help being surprised.

"For me?"

It was mealtime, and Xue Meng was holding the sword tassel that Mo Ran had given him, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

"What're you giving me this for? Trying to apologize for what happened yesterday?"

On the matter of what happened yesterday, Mo Ran had no clue that Chu Wanning had actually been awake at the time, so he was perfectly calm, didn't even bat an eyelid.

Chu Wanning on the other hand was a little less than perfectly calm. He picked up the cup of tea in front and gulped down quite a few mouthfuls of cold tea in an effort to cover it up while buying himself some time to school his expression into one of neutrality.

Mo Ran replied with a grin, "Dunno what you mean, you were the one who started it. The tassel, I just grabbed cause it looked nice, thought I'd give it to you for fun."

He paused, then added, "We rarely get to all go somewhere together, 'course I gotta buy some trinkets. I got things for Shizun, Uncle, and Aunt as well, just some little playthings, nothing expensive."

"Us too?" Madam Wang seemed quite surprised.

"I got Aunt an agarwood cosmetic box, and a pendant for Uncle's fan." Mo Ran handed them their presents as he spoke, before giving Chu Wanning the Dragonblood Crystal. "And this, for Shizun."

"...What is it?"

"A pendant." Mo Ran's palms felt hot and sweaty. "Dragonblood Crystal is a product of Linyi and has warming properties, so I got one for Shizun, to keep warm."

The crystal was inexpensive but useful, so Chu Wanning accepted it. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Isn't Shizun gonna put it on?"

Chu Wanning glanced over at Mo Ran, but did not see through Mo Ran's selfish, intimate motive, and so nonchalantly put it around his neck. The light red crystal glistened brilliantly, and Xue Meng, watching from the side, piped up, "That looks nice, better than my tassel. Where'd you get it from? I want to buy myself one too."

Mo Ran replied, "They don't have any left, the whole store had just the one, I couldn't even get one for myself."

Disappointed, Xue Meng picked up his sword tassel and looked it over, then turned around to look at Chu Wanning's Dragonblood Crystal some more, mumbling, "...No way, this stuff's supposed to be common in Linyi, I'm gonna ask Nangong Si when we get to Rufeng Sect, I bet he has a ton of it, piled into a mountain..."

Mo Ran paid him no mind, too busy watching Chu Wanning instead. He felt a little agitated, seeing that Chu Wanning didn't tuck the pendant inside his clothes, close to his skin after putting it on, leaving it hanging on the outside instead. He tried to hold back for a while, but failed in the end, saying, "Shizun, the pendant isn't meant to be worn on the outside."

"Hm?"

"It has to go inside." He leaned over while saying so, thinking to put the pendant inside for Chu Wanning, but he moved too close too fast; the heat of his breath as he spoke burned Chu Wanning's ear, and he got abruptly shoved off by Chu Wanning.

Lashes lowered over downcast eyes, Chu Wanning's expression looked all cold and stern, but Mo Ran had gotten a close look this time—Chu Wanning's ear was pink as a haitang blossom, looking both pitiable and adorable, making him want to kiss it, to put that trembling petal between his lips and suck on it.

Mo Ran, a bit surprised, wondered: why was Chu Wanning blushing?

He hadn't gone too far or done anything inappropriate, just arranging the pendant for him shouldn't really be a big deal...?

Then, while mulling things over, he remembered the words he'd spoken just now.

"It has to go inside."

Mo Ran was frozen for a second, then his face suddenly turned red as well. If not for his skin being so much more tanned than Chu Wanning's, he'd probably be even redder than Chu Wanning was.

He swore he hadn't meant to make a double entendre when he'd said that earlier...

But then, in the next instant, he found himself startled—if even his own mind hadn't gone to the gutter, then how did Chu Wanning, with all his propriety?

Mo Ran pondered and pondered, but just couldn't figure it out. Even when Chu Wanning, ears red and face gloomy, stuffed the pendant into his clothing without a word, Mo Ran was still none the wiser.

That wooden wall, a mere three fingers wide, had made Taxian-jun miss out on so much last night. He'd missed out on the ripening of the first haitang fruit in spring^[3], missed out on a Chu Wanning made of flesh and blood, who'd fallen into the muddy swamp of carnal desire. He knew nothing of what had happened on the bed across the wall, so of course he wouldn't know that the Chu Wanning of today was still caught in the muddy swamp of yesterday, heart throbbing because of his desire born of love, filled with shame because of it, overly sensitive because of it.

That dream, the filthy pillow talk in that dream, and his need to not get found out had conspired to make him act so out of character as to read something dirty into such a simple sentence.

Chu Wanning looked up and shot him a quick glance; it felt a little hot in his chest, he must still have an excess of internal heat from yesterday. He reached out for——

But the handle of the teapot got grabbed by Mo Ran first.

"Don't drink so much cold tea, it's bad for your stomach."

"....." Chu Wanning said nothing, only stared at him with his hand outstretched still, signalling that he wanted the cold tea anyway.

"I'll go get you a cup of hot tea instead."

"No need..."

But Mo Ran had already gone to find the shopkeeper, returning after a while with a pot of freshly boiled tea and pouring a cup for Chu Wanning. "Here you go, Shizun."

"He's right, Yuheng, you should drink your tea hot, cold tea really isn't good for health."

With no other choice, Chu Wanning could only accept the steaming cup of tea. He blew on it a little, then set it down without drinking any.

His insides felt hot enough already.

Any warmer, and he was afraid that the last remaining layer of thin ice in his gaze would melt as well, and then, if their eyes were to meet, there would be nothing stopping these unbounded feelings from showing, no way to hide these embarrassing thoughts of his.

If that were to happen, how would he, the Beidou Immortal, face anyone ever again?

As they were finishing breakfast and getting ready to leave, a group of people came in.

The person leading the group was wearing a thick, light blue cloak rimmed with a scroll pattern, his face hidden under the hood, very low-key and inconspicuous in the group. But upon setting foot inside the inn and seeing Xue Zhengyong, that person came over of his own accord and made a formal salute.

"Greetings, Uncle Xue."

“Who...”

The person took off his hood. Seeing his face, Xue Meng let out an “ah” and took a big step back, while Xue Zhengyong laughed. “Aiyah, if it isn’t Hanxue!”

Mei Hanxue lifted his face. He had fair skin, a high nose bridge, and defined brows with deep-set eyes, possessed of a unique handsomeness that easily set him apart from everyone else. Moreover, this person had amazing skin that practically glowed even in this dimly-lit space. Perhaps due to having grown up in the frigid land of Kunlun, his features carried an air of frost and snow, making him seem astute and coolly detached.

Simply put, based on his looks and mannerism alone, no one would believe that *he* was the infamous philanderer Mei Hanxue.

“There were some matters to take care of back at the sect, so I had only just arrived at Linyi today. I was surprised to see Uncle Xue here.” Mei Hanxue’s looks were so naturally cold that his eyes were impassive even as he smiled politely, and the gestures of respect were suffused with a chill. “So I came over to greet Uncle and Aunt.”

“Very good, very good. Aiyah, if only Xue-er had your manners.”

But Xue Meng was less than pleased to hear that. He glared daggers at Mei Hanxue from the back, each more venomous than the last.

He thought to himself, this damnable Mei Hanxue! So freakin’ two-faced! This sleazy scoundrel would do anything and anyone, dead or alive, male or female, and had even tried to grope *him* back at the Peach Blossom Springs, but look at him now, acting all prim and proper like some enlightened monk in front of his elders, what a damn faker!

But Mei Hanxue didn’t so much as glance toward his childhood playmate, his gaze remaining fixed and even his lips barely moving, the very image of propriety as he replied, “Uncle jests. Xue-gongzi is the darling of the heavens and the winner of the Spiritual Mountain Competition, I’m sure he is outstanding in other aspects.”

“That’s right, dad, I beat this guy before, you know——”

“Meng-er...” Embarrassed, Madam Wang reached out to tug at Xue Meng. The grouchy little phoenix finally dropped the banter, but not without muttering about it and huffing fire from his nostrils still.

Mei Hanxue asked, “Is Uncle about to head to Rufeng Sect?”

“It’s about time, and no harm getting there a little early anyway, Nangong Liu has nothing if not an abundance of rooms to spare. Didn’t he say something about clearing out a whole city to be guest lodgings for a month before and after the wedding?” Xue Zhengyong answered with a laugh. “We’re gonna head over first, that way the younglings can have some time to get to know each other too.”

He glanced over at Xue Meng as he said that, the matchmaking undertones of his words none-too-subtle.

Xue Meng: “.....”

“Is Hanxue not going straight to Rufeng Sect?”

“I have to run some errands for the sect master and buy a considerable amount of spiritual stones to bring back, so I will be staying in the Dai City area for a few more days. It will not be too late to arrive the day before the wedding.”

Xue Meng muttered under his breath, “Yeah right, you’re clearly just afraid of getting beaten like a dog by all the girls from the various sects that you’ve bullied if you were to get there early.”

But Mo Ran heard, poking with a laugh, “What was that, Meng-meng? Something about a dog?”

“.....”

Xue Meng hmph’d and crossed his arms. “Nothing, I was reciting cultivation scripture.”

“Pfft, sure, the Mei-be-gone scripture.”

“You shut up!!!”

Hearing the bickering, Mei Hanxue finally deigned to glance over at them. Their eyes met, and Xue Meng paused——

Something was *off* about this Mei Hanxue. The last time they’d met, it’d been at the Peach Blossom Springs, and that sleazy guy had been shooting seductive glances left right and center. Those eyes had seemed like they would be smiling even when angry.

But this person in front of him now, his eyes had not even the slightest inclination for flirtation, much less any seductive glances to shoot. It was all icy-cold, neat and orderly, and perfectly restrained. *These* eyes seemed like they would be angry even when smiling.

Xue Meng blinked, frozen in place for a moment as he thought back to when Mei Hanxue had led the disciples of Taxue Palace in battle at the Heavenly Rift, the way he had acted all serious in front of everyone then as well, and couldn’t help the flash of anger that burned through him. How is this guy so good at bluffing? How did he fake it so well? What a two-faced beast! Scum in scholar’s clothing!

“Hey, Meng-er, where are you going?”

“It’s too stuffy in here! I’ll go wait outside, don’t come out til you’re done chatting!” Saying thus, Xue Meng strode to the door, flipped open the door drape, and left in a huff. The poor darling of the heavens felt much too vexed.

He really didn’t get it—the whole damn room smelled like sleazy scum, how come no one else could tell?
Infuriating!

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As mad as he was, they still needed to be on their way.

After bidding farewell to Mei Hanxue, they headed upwards to Dacheng City, and after over an hour of walking, they finally arrived at the number one largest sect in the world——Rufeng Sect of Linyi.

From the name, it was clear that Rufeng Sect was situated in Linyi, and seventy-two big and small immortal mansions were built in a long stretch within the city. Since the mansions were massive estates and it’d take at least a whole meal’s worth of time on horseback to go from the front entrance to the back entrance, these mansions were matter-of-factly called “cities”. The seventy-two cities of the Rufeng Sect each had their own duties, their ranking system clear, and evidently a whole world of difference compared to the measly pot of weeds that was Sisheng Peak; they stood on completely different levels. Even Xue

Meng, who despised the people of the Upper Cultivation World, couldn't help but be stunned at the entrance to the cities.

Rufeng Sect; descendents of the divine.
Those words did not describe them falsely.

The city they came to was the main city, which was also the largest metropolis of Rufeng Sect. White-walled and black-tiled roofs, the buildings reached the skies. There were four towers at each corner of the city, grand and majestic, and at all four directions of North, East, South, West stood a stone que of the constellations. The main city gate was painted red and lined with gold, and the road that expanded outward was at least five meters wide, a grand road that stretched on for so long it went out of sight, paved with Qi-Refinement stones. With this rock, one only needed to stand upon it and do nothing else, and spiritual power would gather. Although the effect of the rocks was minimal, many little made a mickle, so every one of these rocks could cost over a thousand gold.

Xue Zhengyong marveled, "It's so nice to be rich..."

Madam Wang chuckled at this. "Would you want to pave a Qi-Refinement stone road for Sisheng Peak too, if you had the money?"

"Nah, I would pave a market square in every village in the Lower Cultivation World. These rocks are rife with spiritual power, little ghosts and monsters won't dare to go close, so if every village can have such a square, then when demons and monsters wreak havoc, the people will be able to hide out for a while in the event our disciples can't make it on time." Xue Zhengyong talked on, but when he counted with his fingers, he shook his head. "Unfortunately we don't have the money for it."

Xue Meng sighed too, having heard. "Sisheng Peak, ah, *is* a little poor."

"Yeah." Xue Zhengyong nodded enthusiastically. "Rufeng Sect and us are both of the same cultivation path, who knows where they earned so much money."

Just then, Chu Wanning who had been quiet the entire time, spoke up, "Does my lord know how much exorcism requests to regular disciples of Rufeng Sect cost?"

"I've never heard. How much?"

Chu Wanning showed four fingers.

"Four hundred silver?" Xue Zhengyong's eyes widened. "That expensive?"

"Four thousand gold," Chu Wanning said.

"....."

"The Upper Cultivation World is full of a great number of wealthy merchants, so it is easy for Rufeng Sect to acquire profit. How can Sect Leader reach their level when you only charge eighty silver for each request? Not to mention the times Sect Leader did not accept payment at all." Chu Wanning's eyes were gentle despite his words. "Come. Let us enter the city."

There was a proper etiquette for prominent sects to receive guests, and the ceremony department of Rufeng Sect had been waiting at the city gates over the past few days. While they were full of smiles, they knew quite well who the guests were, as well as their precise status.

For rogue travelers and small time cultivators, the ceremony department would accompany them to visit around, then direct them to their housing. As for small sects with some ranking, they would be led to meet the managing guardian elder, and have the elder receive them.

However, when it came to Sisheng Peak, which had made it to the top ten, Rufeng Sect did not put on airs, but welcomed them directly to a heated pavilion to rest while they waited for Rufeng Sect's leader, Nangong Liu, to wrap up his business before coming to greet the esteemed guests.

The air was thick with the fragrance of ambergris incense, the carpet on the floor was so soft that their feet sank in deep, and the pavilion was decorated with tender and stunning camellias. One blooming with eight different colors to one plant was called "The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea", another blooming with white petals and dotted with scarlet was called "Vibrance in Nude", and the one with its petal veins dyed in strings of red was called "Frail Beauty Leaning". Xue Zhengyong didn't know this kind of stuff, but Madam Wang was well aware that every single plant placed here was a breed of the highest quality.

Xue Meng didn't know either, so when he spotted a charming camellia with twin dots of black on its soft petals, he found it interesting and reached out, wanting to touch it.

"Don't move," Mo Ran said.

"Why?"

Chu Wanning didn't speak and only shook his head. Madam Wang let out a sigh and answered, "Valuable things are a delight to the eyes. A flower like this can sell for tens of thousands of gold."

"....." Xue Meng withdrew his hand with a ghastly face, then sat down in the soft-cushioned taishi chair^[4] dejectedly.

He remembered that rankings book he'd found at the book stall in the past, and how furious he'd been when the list of one hundred richest heroes hadn't included him. Now he thought, that book had never lied to him.

His forehead was practically printed with the giant word that emitted an air of gloom:

POOR.

But speaking of, where had that book gone to? He hadn't had a chance to finish flipping through it before it was lost...

A while later, a curtain made of interlaced red corals and freshwater pearls clacked as two elegant and dignified lady cultivators came forth, their snow-silk celestial robes of the Rufeng Sect flutter. One stood on the left and one on the right, they raised the beaded curtain, lowered their eyes and bent halfway at the knees, their voices sonorous like songbirds.

"The esteemed Sect Leader has arrived."

As soon as the announcement was made, a man of forty-odd years of age walked in with a broad smile. His appearance was plain, a little bookish, the kind of average that would be swallowed up in a crowd, and other than the fact that he was exceptionally fair, it didn't seem like there was anything else to write home about.

However, the moment he spoke, Mo Ran who had been sipping tea sitting there almost spat——

"Aiyah, Sect Leader Xue, Sect Leader Xue, ^[5] have been gazing at the stars, gazing at the moon, gazing for when you will finally come visit Rufeng

Sect. Look at you, dashing and spirited, mighty and impressive, a hero of the world, matched by no man! Excellent, fantastic, you've brought life to this humble abode. Good! Good! Good!"

Xue Meng: "....."

Mo Ran, "....."

Though deemed to be the number one sect of the world, when faced with the last of the top ten, Sisheng Peak, Nangong Si surprisingly spared no effort and praised them without restraint, giving them a "Good!" thrice in a row, each more fervent than the previous, each more excited than the last.

Xue Zhengyong obviously enjoyed the eager praise, and replied with a happy smile, "Please, please, Sect Leader Nangong is too gracious."

"I am not trying to be polite, I am envious of Sect Leader Xue from the bottom of my heart. Sect Leader Xue is a hero of our time, awe-inspiring, worthy of admiration. Look at me, dull in my middle age, nothing but a dead body with all the spare fat. I truly cannot compare."

Nangong Liu was so ecstatically warm that even though Xue Zhengyong had wanted to hold back his peacock tail, he failed and the tail fanned out. "Oh no, oh no, haha, hahaha, Sect Leader Nangong does over flatter!"

In the past life, Mo Ran had never crossed paths with Nangong Liu. When he'd slaughtered Rufeng Sect, this man had fled speedily. Mo Ran hadn't bothered to care for such a small fish, and he didn't care whether the man died under the disarray of crossfires or escaped and concealed his name to live out the rest of his life.

This was the first time in this life that he'd ever come this close to Nangong Liu, but just the man's tone alone made Mo Ran feel distaste. He muttered under his breath, "So, turns out, the sect leader of the number one sect in the world is brilliant because of lip service."

Xue Meng heard him and, in agreement for once, whispered back, "You're right, that's what you call a real silver tongue. His words are blooming so hard I can barely smell all the flowers in the room anymore, tsk, all that's left is the sweetness on his lips."

After Nangong Liu was done praising the elder, he came after the young.

"Aiyoh, isn't this the darling of the heavens, the little Xue-gongzi?"

Dirt-poor Young Master Xue Meng might be, but his spirit was not lacking. He coolly gave a quick cup of his hands, "Sect Leader Nangong."

"Truly a gallant youth, handsome! Incredible! Look at this nose, those eyes, tsk tsk, the spirit! As expected, no dull sons are born of great fathers!"

Xue Meng: "....."

Nangong Liu turned his head and said to Xue Zhengyong, "Xue-xiong, I'm deadly envious of you. Look around, which house in this world has half the mettle of your son! If I must speak, there are so many outstanding young people in this vast cultivation world, but there are next to none who can match your son!"

Xue Meng had been condescending at first, scorning the man, but it was as if Nangong Liu hadn't noticed Xue Meng's coolness at all, and was thwacking a basket full of enthusiastic compliments at him, knocking the perfectly fine little

Xue-gongzi all aswoon, and in the end, the boy actually let loose a crack of a smile.

By the time he returned to whispering with Mo Ran again, the words in his mouth had already become, "Ahem, this Sect Leader Nangong might be exaggerating a little, but he's speaking the truth."

"What truth?" Mo Ran was amused, and gave him a side glance. "That there's next to none who can match you?"

"What? I'm telling you, at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, I was..."

"That was a competition, many of the rogue cultivators didn't participate. Did you actually think that the world's greatest would emerge from that tiny little scuffle of a competition?"

"....." Xue Meng flushed, and a moment later, he grumbled indignantly, "Forget it, I know you're just jealous."

If they were still young, Mo Ran most definitely would've teased him over this, yet now that the words came to his tongue, he felt there wasn't any point to argue with Xue Meng and that competitive, narcissistic personality of his. Thus, he nodded with a grin, "Fine fine fine, I was jealous. You're the bestest."

However, when Mo Ran raised his eyes to glance at Nangong Liu, the smile in his eyes faded completely.

There were many different types of villains in this world. Some were heinously depraved, their sins so great that all in the world would die to execute them for good.

And then there were some who were truly incredible. With their silver tongues and their ability to bootlick, they could be rotten to the core and still not be scorned by the public.

In Mo Ran's previous life, he was the former. However, the ones he despised the most were not the beneficent who fought against him; he didn't hate Mei Hanxue, he didn't hate Xue Meng, he didn't even hate Ye Wangxi, even admired as well as pitied Ye Wangxi.

He despised Nangong Liu's type the most: he was an ass-kisser who, as long as there was the tiniest bit of benefit to be gained, would kneel on the ground and lick another's hemorrhoid.

Hell. A hemorrhoid-sucker.

Chu Wanning had been standing by the window ever since Nangong Liu had come in, looking out at the organized rows of houses and the magnificence that was the Rufeng Sect.

Winds were brisk at high places, the soft and fragrant silk curtains covering the window hazed with the wafting of air, and Chu Wanning stood there shrouded in obscurity. The fervent friendliness plastered on Nangong Liu's face froze for a moment, then it was quickly tidied away before he walked towards the window.

"Chu-zongshi..."

Chu Wanning didn't look at him, and his expression was bland. "Sect Leader Nangong, you and I already know each other inside out."

Leaning on the easterly wind, that fragrant silk as soft as spring waters persistently caressed Chu Wanning's face. Irritated, Chu Wanning raised his

hand and forcefully stopped the annoying thing, and said mildly, “No need for the pleasantries.”

Nangong Liu gave a smile and said, “I don’t mean anything, I just think that it has been many years since I last saw Chu-zongshi, so I wanted to greet you, that’s all. Zongshi, why keep me at such a distance?”

“I came for Nangong Si.” Chu Wanning still didn’t turn his head. “Not for you.”

“Si-er will be very delighted to see you. Although you did not take him in as a disciple, you were still his first teacher. He often tells me he misses you after you left.”

“.....”

Seeing how Chu Wanning did not rebuke, Nangong Liu continued, “Zongshi, your impassioned actions for the sake of justice at Butterfly Town during the heavenly rift was admired by the world. You returned to the living after receiving the help of Master Huaizui, but I imagine you are not yet fully recovered? Rufeng Sect has especially prepared for you twenty Soul-Nourishing Pills of the highest grade. I want to show gratitude on behalf of all the cultivators in the world, and pray zongshi will take——”

“Nangong Liu.”

Chu Wanning finally turned his head to look the man in the eye, but his tone of address changed at the same time. He withdrew the arm that was leaning against the fragrant silk and spun around, his tall, slender form practically fusing with the boundless light.

His eyes were ablaze, his brows frigid, and his gaze extremely threatening.

“Do not place me on a pedestal. How can a mere Rufeng Sect thank me on behalf of all the cultivators in the world? Who gave you that right?”

“.....” The corners of Nangong Liu’s lips twitched, but alas, the smile on his face did not fall apart, and after a pause, he replied with a chuckle, “There’s no need to be like this...”

Xue Zhengyong knew Chu Wanning and Nangong Si did not share a good relationship; in fact, the entire cultivation world knew this. When Chu Wanning had been fifteen, Nangong Liu had taken him in as a guest advisor, had provided the utmost hospitality, and worshipped him like a god. However, it hadn’t taken many years before Chu Wanning suddenly turned hostile with Nangong Liu inside the grand hall of Rufeng Sect. The two had exchanged words, saying things like “Jincheng Lake”, “Shenwu”, “The demand of the monster at the bottom of the lake”, “Morality and justice”, “Ill for a long time”, “The madam”, et cetera. Either way, those who’d heard were completely at a loss.

But everyone knew that at the end of it, Chu Wanning had been furious beyond appeasement, and he’d slapped the table as he rose to his feet.

“He was earning ten thousand gold at the time, and over thousands of spiritual stones as well as spiritual talismans every month, yet he did not take a single cent, and rejected every penny. He stood before the hall and took off the qiankun pouch on his waist in front of everyone, returned all the remaining money, then with a dark expression, he pulled off the top grade jade Crown of the Highest Master that Nangong Si had gifted him when he’d first entered as a guest advisor. His long hair fell unbound as he passed the jade crown to the ceremony official of Rufeng Sect.”

——This was a scene many of the storytellers of the Lower Cultivation World told with relish.

“Nangong Si was gravely upset, yet he still attempted to smooth things over, so he said to Chu-zongshi, ‘Xianzhang has served the sect for so long, even if you must leave, the money owed still needs to be settled. The Rufeng Sect does not wish to be known as one who takes advantage of others.’

However, Chu-zongshi replied, ‘For all this time I have served this hall, it was but to repay the madam’s kindness of a meal. Now that the madam has passed, the esteemed sect and I have come to the crossroads, and I have no intention to stay any longer. There is no need for the money, I will be ashamed to receive the gracious pay.’ And with that he turned around, taking his leave of the Rufeng Sect.”

At first, Xue Zhengyong had thought the storytellers were greatly exaggerating the event, and for that he had once tried to ask Chu Wanning how exactly the Rufeng Sect had offended him. However, Chu Wanning did not like talking behind people’s backs, so he had only shaken his head but never spoken of it in detail.

But judging by the situation now, it would appear the storytellers had not uttered a single lie.

Madam Wang saw how frozen the mood was and couldn’t help but step forward to make peace. She said gently, “Yuheng Elder, please calm your fury. Don’t allow your anger to hurt yourself.” Then she turned around and gave Nangong Liu a respectful bow, “Nangong-xianjun, we appreciate your kind gesture, but Sisheng Peak does not lack for spiritual stones and valuable medicine. We cannot accept your Soul-Nourishing Pills...”

“...Haha, madam is right, I was thoughtless.” Nangong Liu accepted the chance to disengage and said smoothly, “Yuheng Elder, forgive me for the offense, I pray the elder does not take it to heart...”

Mo Ran watched from the side and thought, *Shizun rained on this guy’s parade and he still can smile so easily. Amazing.*

He looked down and took a sip of the Sun-shone Snow green tea.

Who would’ve thought that in the brief moment it took for him to sip tea, Nangong Liu had already come before him bearing a wide grin.

Author’s Note:

Only one verse for today’s mini theatre:

“Straight dude Xue Meng is a brick, to lay for every hole where needs a prick.”

【直男薛蒙是块砖，哪里缺受哪里搬】

Ch.154 Shizun, I’m Gonna Go Look For Ye Wangxi

Well, now it was awkward. Everyone else in the room, from Madam Wang to Xue Meng and Xue Zhengyong, had politely stood up in greeting when Nangong Liu entered earlier.

Chu Wanning hadn’t cared to do so, and had remained standing where he was by the window.

But as for Mo Ran, Rufeng Sect was nothing more to him than some worthless garbage sect he had trodden underfoot in his previous life. He knew well that the place was a disjointed mess beneath all that glamor, hardly worthy

of any respect. But he really didn't mean to make things difficult for Nangong Liu just now, he was just so used to it that it didn't even occur to him to stand.

It was quite the strange scene indeed.

Nangong Liu, the host and the elder, standing there with an amicable smile, not at all angry, expression full of warm familiarity still.

Mo Ran, the guest and the junior, reclining languidly in the taishi chair with his legs crossed and a piping hot cup of tea in his hand.

Xue Zhengyong hadn't been paying attention to what Mo Ran had been doing earlier, but turning around to look now, he couldn't help feeling mortified.

This Mo Ran really had no manners!

"And you must be... the famed Mo-zongshi that everyone's been talking about these last few years?"

Putting the lid back on his cup of tea, Mo Ran lifted his eyes and replied, "That's me."

"Such gallant y——"

Mo Ran cut him off with a smile. "Nangong-xianjun, you've already used 'gallant youth' on my cousin, so mayhaps not on me as well?"

He spoke courteously, with an easy tone and a warm smile, but the words themselves were anything but courteous. Nor did he bother to stand; in fact, after tossing out those words, he lifted his teacup once again, scraped the celadon lid against the rim of the cup, and blew at the gently rising steam.

And then, dropping his gaze along with those dense, long eyelashes, went back to leisurely sipping his tea.

He was young, handsome, tall, and poised. His attitude and mannerisms made it seem like he was the real master of Rufeng Sect, the one who stood at the top of the entire cultivation realm, while Nangong Liu was just a dog perched by his seat.

"Haha, Mo-zongshi is quite right, I just couldn't think of a better phrase due to my own lack of learning, so——"

"That can't be right." Mo Ran put his teacup down and looked up with a smile. "Nangong-xianjun has had no end of praises to give out ever since entering this room, so if *you* aren't a smooth talker, then who out there *is*?"

"Aiya, Mo-zongshi flatters me too much."

"Who said I was flattering you," Mo Ran said with a smile, bright eyes fixed on him. "Being a smooth talker isn't always a good thing."

Xue Zhengyong finally couldn't take it anymore. Lowering his voice, he muttered, "Ran-er——!"

From his point of view, it was understandable for Chu Wanning to be unfriendly toward Nangong Liu; at least there was history between them, and Chu Wanning had the social status for it, but Mo Ran...

But Mo Ran paid Xue Zhengyong no mind, speaking instead to Nangong Liu, "Nangong-xianjun should save the honeyed words for the other juniors. I'm a crude person, I won't understand it, nor do I want to hear it."

Xue Zhengyong: "....."

Mo Ran was well aware that his uncle would be displeased with his behavior, but he didn't regret it in the least.

There were far too many disgusting things in the world. Chu Wanning had a fierce temper and was always sticking his neck out, like back then with the exorcism at Luo Xianxian's place, when Chu Wanning had beaten up Landlord Chen, the paying client, regardless of any repercussions to his reputation, because the Chens had mistreated a helpless girl.

Chu Wanning had done nothing wrong, yet he was always being bad-mouthed by others, people who would call him "coldblooded", "out of control", and "unfeeling".

He didn't want to let other people call his shizun "ill-mannered" ever again.

And so he would act even more egregious than Chu Wanning, even more over the top. Dumb though it was, it was the only way he knew of to shelter Chu Wanning behind himself. Thus, the other three in this room accepted Nangong Liu's flattery and favor out of politeness and decorum, but Mo Ran did not.

It wasn't a spur of the moment thing. Ever since he found out that it had been Chu Wanning who had carried him home on his back from that mountain of corpses, crawling when he had to, ever since he'd seen, in Mengpo Hall, that Human Soul, and that bowl of wontons, ever since he'd gone to the depths of the Underworld to bring back Chu Wanning, he'd vowed——

That he would stand with Chu Wanning from now on, for as long as Chu Wanning would have him.

Nangong Liu had already run into two walls in a row. Were it the head of any other sect, they would've long since flown into a table-flipping rage and kicked all of them out.

But Nangong Liu didn't do any of that. He acted like nothing whatsoever had happened, cheerfully chatting with Xue Zhengyong for a while longer until Xue Zhengyong couldn't take the embarrassment anymore and pulled him aside to quietly apologize that he had been too lax with his nephew.

Only for Nangong Liu to laugh it off. "Aiya, it's perfectly normal for a youngster to be bold. I actually think it's a great thing that Mo-zongshi is so passionate."

After the meeting with Nangong Liu, Rufeng disciples led the group to the courtyard where they will be staying.

Mo Ran sneezed the whole way there. Xue Meng turned to look at him. "Maybe the Nangong Sect Leader put a curse on you for all that smart-mouthing just now..."

"Shut it, more like *you* got cursed." Mo Ran's eyes were all teary. "I... *achoo*, I can't handle such a strong incense smell, that room back there——*achoo!* The incense was really too... *achoo!* Too..."

"Too unpleasant."

"Ah, Shi——*achoo*——zun."

Chu Wanning furrowed his brows and handed his handkerchief over with a disdainful, "How unsightly, wipe yourself up."

Teary-eyed still, Mo Ran accepted the haitang-embroidered handkerchief with a grin. "Shizun is so nice to me, thank you Shizun."

Chu Wanning was a little flustered. "Who's nice to you."

"That's right!" Xue Meng piped up, unwilling to be second. "Who's nice to *you*, I'm clearly the one that Shizun is nicest to!"

Mo Ran retorted tauntingly, "Aren't you a little too old to be making a contest of *that*?" Before turning all serious and holding up the handkerchief in his hand. "See this? Shizun said he'll sew me one just like it. Do *you* have one?"

"....." Chu Wanning snatched the handkerchief back with lightning speed, snapping, "Mo Weiyu!"

Xue Meng was frozen in shock for a second before flying into a rage. "Yeah right, as if anyone's gonna believe that Shizun would sew *you* a handkerchief! Keep dreaming! Shameless."

While chatting, they arrived at the courtyard that Nangong Liu had prepared for them. The courtyard had four sections, one for Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang and one for each of the rest of them. Flowers danced gently between winding paths to quiet retreats, and the soothing sound of running water babbled serenely in the background, truly a scene of singular elegance.

Mo Ran, who had been in good spirits, faltered when he saw that it was *this* courtyard they would be staying in, his eyes glazing over for a moment despite himself. Following everyone else into the courtyard, his mood only sank ever lower as he took in the details of the surroundings.

This was the one place in Rufeng Sect that had left a deep impression on him in the previous lifetime.

To now come across this place once more, he couldn't help thinking about how, if Chu Wanning hadn't called him back at the cost of his own life in this lifetime, perhaps he would've walked the same path as before and become Emperor Taxian-jun, and it would've been around this time that he'd be leading millions of Zhenlong chess pieces and burning this renowned sect to the ground. The thought sent cold sweat streaming down his back and a thousand thoughts rushing through his mind.

Mo Ran closed his eyes. He could keep his emotions in check now, was no longer the youth who wore his heart on his sleeve that he'd used to be, so no one noticed the haze clouding his heart.

They each retired to their own rooms to rest. Mo Ran stood in front of his unit for a while, hands folded behind his back, but did not go inside.

Feeling a little uneasy, one of the maids in the courtyard asked carefully, "Does xianjun find the room unsatisfactory?"

"Oh, no no." Breaking out of his daze, Mo Ran smiled. "The courtyard just reminded me of somewhere I used to live, is all."

"What a coincidence. I was worried that xianjun didn't like the place. If xianjun needs anything, please feel free to let me know and I will do my best to fulfill it."

Mo Ran said with a smile, "I'm good, thank you."

He looked up at the hundred year old osmanthus tree in the yard, its trunk so thick he would strain to wrap his arms around it, the dancing shade of its foliage sweeping across his eyes like ghosts from his past.

Eyelashes quivering minutely, a melancholic feeling filled his chest.

He turned abruptly and called out to the maid who was just leaving. "Wait!"

"What does xianjun need?"

“...I wanted to ask about someone.” Mo Ran paused, and when he lifted his eyes, his gaze was torch-bright. “Do you know of a...”

“A...?”

“Actually, nevermind, let me ask about someone else instead,” Mo Ran said. “Do you know where Ye Wangxi is?”

The maid answered, “Ye-gongzi is Elder Xu’s personal disciple and lives with him in the same courtyard. Xianjun can find him there.”

Hearing that, Mo Ran secretly let out the breath he’d been holding. The last time he’d seen Ye Wangxi had been at that restaurant, where he’d begged Nangong Si to go back with him and Nangong Si had refused, and Ye Wangxi had said, “If it’s because of me that you don’t want to go back to Rufeng Sect, I’ll leave.”

To be honest, he was a little worried about Ye Wangxi. Ye Wangxi had already suffered enough in the previous lifetime, and he felt like Ye Wangxi was actually quite similar to Chu Wanning, both of them people of morals and conviction, just that one was more reserved while the other was more fiery, but neither had a good ending.

Repentant over what he’d done in the past, Mo Ran hoped that the Ye Wangxi could be better-off in this lifetime. He couldn’t help being relieved that Nangong Si hadn’t been so heartless as to really chase Ye Wangxi off.

Elder Xu’s courtyard was called “Farewell to Three Lifetimes”, the name supposedly taken from the verse “One sip of Mengpo’s soup to bid farewell to three lifetimes’ memories”, to express the fleetingness of life, that it would be best to forget that which should be forgotten rather than dwelling on them incessantly, since all would be forgotten in death by the time one got to the Naihe Bridge anyway.

Sure sounded like a pessimistic guy. No wonder Ye Wangxi had turned out so repressed that you wouldn’t even be able to beat a fart out of him.

“What a clever parrot, how interesting. Now recite this: One bowl of rice, one scoop of water, in a humble alley^[6]...”

The guard had already gone to pass on word of his visit and what he was here for, and Mo Ran had yet to step around the partition wall^[7] when he heard the languid, teasing voice of a man drift out from within the courtyard.

Mo Ran took a couple more steps inside before he saw the man standing in the sun-bathed courtyard. He looked to be in his early thirties, and was dressed in a robe so plain that it even had a few patches in the corners of its sleeves. He also wasn’t wearing any shoes despite how cold it was, standing bare-footed on the ice-cold stone pavement with a handful of sunflower seeds, teasing a snow white parrot with blue eyes and a long tail.

The parrot flapped its wings as it rocked side to side on its perch, seemingly quite pleased with itself as it sang loudly back, “Ah~ one bowl of rice~ one scoop of water~ in a humble alley~”

“Mm, not bad, not bad. You’re smarter than Xiao Ye-zi^[8], you know, he wasn’t nearly this clever when he was young, couldn’t memorize this bit at all no matter what he did.” The man fed the parrot some seeds. “Here, treats from daddy.”

“.....”

Calling himself a bird’s daddy...

Did that make him a cuckoo^[9] then?

When the man turned and saw Mo Ran standing by the partition wall, he first cracked a sunflower seed between his teeth and spit out the shell before suddenly beaming a bright smile with a hint of something darker beneath. Under the radiant sunlight, he gave off an air of breezy nonchalance.

“Mo-zongshi, Mo Ran, yes?” He smiled. “Pleased to meet you.”

Mo Ran returned the smile, and replied, “Same here.”

After the exchange of pleasantries, Mo Ran took a closer look at the other person’s face. He looked vaguely familiar, as if he’d seen him before during his slaughter of Rufeng Sect in the past life. Was he...

“Yifu^[10], you’re running around without shoes again.”

A familiar voice suddenly rang out. Such an unimportant remark, but one that was thunderous to Mo Ran’s ears.

Mo Ran whipped his head around just in time to see Ye Wangxi come in through the moon gate^[11], tall and slender as ever, gentleness in his expression. He walked over to the man, holding a pair of yellow satin shoes which he set down in front of him.

Yifu?

Ye Wangxi’s Yifu...

Through the thrumming of blood in his ears, he could practically hear the cries and screams from a lifetime past, the clang of sword against sword, the maelstrom of battle drums.

“YIFU!!!!”

A face marred with bloodstains burst forth through his memories.

It was Ye Wangxi, crying and screaming, voice splitting the heavens themselves...When he’d razed Rufeng Sect back then, Nangong Liu had fled to save his own hide, leaving the seventy two cities headless and floundering. Later, Rufeng Sect’s foremost guardian Elder Xu had stepped up and taken the reins, marshalling the panicked masses in resistance together with Ye Wangxi, masses that Mo Ran would’ve otherwise wiped out in an instant .

He wasn’t even a Nangong, yet he took on the responsibility that should’ve belonged to a sect leader with that surname, using his position as elder of Rufeng Sect to defend its seventy two cities to the last.

He wasn’t even Ye Wangxi’s father by blood, yet he’d moved to block the sharp blade filled with spiritual power piercing toward Ye Wangxi’s back, using his own body to protect the child he had raised.

Mo Ran had been watching from atop the city walls then. Seeing this scene, the corner of his lips had twisted into a sneer—heavens only knew how jealous he’d been in that moment.

To think that there was someone out there who would willingly die for another with no blood relation!

His narrow-minded self had felt shocked, pained, and he was so jealous he’d almost gone mad, so jealous that even his eyes had gone bloodshot.

He’d thought, great, that’s just great, look how lucky Ye Wangxi was. As for himself...if there had been even just a single person in this whole wide world other than his mother who’d be willing to die for him, would he have ended up like this?!

The heavens were kind to everyone else; only to him were they so grudging, so cruel!

He’d wanted to destroy everyone that he was jealous of. All these people huddled together for warmth, he was going to send every last one of them to

hell. How was it any fair that only *he* never got even a single day of contentment or a single moment of warmth, that the only person who had ever been kind to him had died so long ago.

It was the only bit of warmth he'd ever had, why did it have to be taken away from him?!!!

He *hated*!

“.....”

Looking back now, Mo Ran's only thought was how stupid he had been back then. There *was* someone in this world who would willingly die for him, but *he* was the one who had missed it, had let that person down, had not realized.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and took a moment to calm his turbulent emotions before opening them again to look up.

He knew who this man was now: He was Ye Wangxi's shizun, as well as his yifu—Xu Shuanglin.

The person who, on the second day of the slaughter of Rufeng Sect, had died in battle to save Ye Wangxi.

Mo Ran turned away, a bitter aching in his heart; he couldn't bear to look at that smiling, carefree person bathed in sunlight any longer.

He went to say hi to Ye Wangxi instead.

“Ye-gongzi.”

Ye Wangxi paused, only just noticing Mo Ran standing a little ways off. Then he smiled and said, “Ah, Mo-xiong is here too. Long time no see.”

“Long time no see.”

The Ye Wangxi of this lifetime had only met Mo Ran a handful of times, and wasn't very familiar with him, so he continued to smile politely while asking, “Are you here looking for my Yifu?”

“.....” Mo Ran glanced over at Xu Shuanglin before shaking his head, feeling a little awkward. “No, I'm here for you.”

“Well, look at that, Xiao Ye-zi, when was the last time someone came here looking for you?” Smiling lazily, Xu Shuanglin popped another sunflower seed into his mouth. “Where did you meet Mo-zongshi, anyway?”

“At the Peach Blossom Springs.”

“That's nice, that's nice,” Xu Shuanglin said with a smile while putting the rest of the sunflower seeds into the bird's food bowl. “You youngins keep chatting, I'm going to go take a walk around.”

Ye Wangxi tugged at him. “Yifu, you aren't wearing your shoes again.”

“Oh, I forgot.” Smiling, Xu Shuanglin put the shoes on. “There, better?”

But, out of the corner of his eye, Mo Ran saw the man stroll leisurely around the corner, bend down, take the shoes off again, and tuck them into the front of his robe before leisurely continuing on his merry way.

“.....”

This father-son pair, in terms of both appearance and personality, really were strange. Xu Shuanglin looked very young due to his cultivation method, aging not a day past thirty, and seemed more like Ye Wangxi's brother than anything else.

And then, taking into account his willful, mischievous temperament, he didn't even seem like the older brother, but the younger instead.

So what was with that plaque outside solemnly inscribed “Farewell to Three Lifetimes” then, was he just messing around or what?

Side by side, Ye Wangxi and Mo Ran walked slowly along a shaded path.

The courtyard was full of both flowering trees and fruit trees, but it was the middle of winter, so everything was withered, leaving only a couple of dry, yellow leaves dangling from the branches, quivering in the wake of the passing wind.

“Sorry about the last time, at the restaurant, it was quite embarrassing.”

“Not at all,” Mo Ran said. “How have you been lately?”

He regretted it as soon as he said it, because Ye Wangxi was the kind of person who wouldn’t say anything even if he was miserable. Sure enough, Ye Wangxi smiled a little and said, “I’m alright, and you?”

“Pretty good.”

The two of them weren’t close. Mo Ran only came looking for him because he remembered the wrongs he had done in the past life, felt remorseful, and wanted to come see how this still-living Ye Wangxi was doing. But now that he was alone with him, he didn’t really know what to say.

Mo Ran knew many of Ye Wangxi’s secrets, none of which he could bring up, so he found himself with nothing to talk about. The two of them strolled in silence for a while, then Ye Wangxi asked, “How’s Xia Sini been?”

Mo Ran was caught by surprise for a moment, then he chuckled. “You still remember that name? Impressive.”

“His name is rather memorable.”

“Haha, I suppose. Xia Sini is here too, you can see him later.”

Ye Wangxi seemed surprised. “He’s here too? ...But I don’t think the sect leader would’ve invited...”

“You still don’t know who Xia Sini really is, do you?” Mo Ran said with a laugh. “Let me tell you then, it’s a long story though.”

And so he recounted the chain of events that led to Chu Wanning becoming Xia Sini. Ye Wangxi looked pensive for a while afterwards, then said with a sigh, “Mo-gongzi is very fortunate to have him as your master.”

To which Mo Ran said, “And Rufeng Sect is very fortunate to count Ye-gongzi among its disciples.”

Ye Wangxi, a little embarrassed, replied with a small smile, “Mo-gongzi is too kind.”

They arrived at a small, red-painted pontoon bridge. The whole way here had been nothing but dry branches and shriveled leaves, but this place was verdant and vibrant, with tall stalks of bamboo that stood proud and unyielding come wind or snow. The waters at Rufeng Sect had all been infused with spiritual power to prevent freezing, and so the ambience at the foot of the bridge was the sweet tinkling of running water embraced by twin groves of lush green.

When Mo Ran turned around, he saw Ye Wangxi with his eyes downcast, gaze fixed on the sparkling stream, reflected light dancing across dark eyes. He was still the same person, but the weariness on his face was hard to miss.

Nangong Si’s marriage was really much too cruel to him.

He suddenly found it hard to bear, as if he was looking at Chu Wanning, who gave so much yet couldn't even get so much as a backwards glance. Mo Ran asked, "Ye-gongzi, why don't you come to Sisheng Peak instead?"

"What?"

"....." The words felt impetuous as soon as they'd left his lips, and he well knew what Ye Wangxi's answer would be anyway. Mo Ran sighed, "Just an offhand remark, don't mind me."

Ye Wangxi smiled in response. He used to have a very handsome and good-looking smile, with seven parts gallantry and three parts elegance. It was still the same person and the same smile, but his cheeks were a bit sunken in now, and though the seven parts gallantry were still there, the three parts elegance had withered away, leaving behind only twin pools of sorrow.

He tried to hide it, but the sorrow was too deep to be covered despite his best efforts.

He joked with a smile, "Is Mo-xiong here to poach people for Sisheng Peak?"

"Haha, sure am. Though, Ye-gongzi probably wouldn't bite, so just take it as a joke."

"Mn, my Yifu is still here, so I'm not leaving."

"What do you plan to do, then?"

"....." There was a flash of pain across Ye Wangxi's expression, and for once he didn't have an answer at the ready. What did he plan to do? He didn't know, either. He felt like he was a moth to Nangong Si's flame, couldn't help being drawn to that flame even if it would only lead to his own ruin.

But Nangong Si didn't want him.

"I'll just, stay here at Rufeng Sect doing the things I'm supposed to do," Ye Wangxi said with a small smile. "Serve the sect leader, serve Yifu, and later, serve the young master."

He paused, hands tightening into fists, the joints turning pale as jade.

Mo Ran was perturbed that Ye Wangxi could actually manage to say the rest of that sentence so calmly, that he could actually say those words at all...

"Serve the young mistress."

Having said that, he dropped his gaze, as if finally unable to bear it any longer. But it was only for a brief moment, and then he lifted his head back up, looking at Mo Ran in that gentle, polite way of his, even managing to keep smiling as he stood there in the bitter cold of winter, resilient as the bamboo around them.

A sudden gust picked up, sending the fresh-fallen snow scattering amongst the bamboo groves.

In that moment, Mo Ran decided: No, Nangong Si was *not* going to marry Song Qiutong.

Ch.155 Shizun, Are You Shocked

The grand wedding ceremony of the young master of the Rufeng Sect was fast approaching, but there was suddenly a rumor surfacing to the top, spreading among the guests of every major sect.

“Zhang-gongzi, I have recently learned of something that sounded absurd at first, but after much thought, it was most likely true. Do you want to hear it?”

“What a coincidence, I also have a secret that concerns the Rufeng Sect. It is also a shocking rumor, perhaps it is the same thing you wanted to share?”

The other quirked his brows meaningfully and replied, “Does the secret Zhang-gongzi hold concern a particular couple?”

“Indeed.”

The two exchanged a look, and one of them said in a low voice, “Listen to mine first. I heard Ye Wangxi of the Rufeng Sect and...”

The other couldn’t hold back anymore upon hearing this, completely ditching the proper manners of a gongzi and bursting out laughing as he slapped his thigh, his eyes beaming with gossip. He exclaimed excitedly, “Yes yes yes! Hahaha it *killed* me, that’s the secret! Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong of the Rufeng Sect are having an affair!”

“This really is ‘good news stays indoors and bad news travels for a thousand miles’. I didn’t realize even you, Lian-gongzi, who doesn’t enjoy listening to meaningless gossip, knew this. But we’ll have to keep our voices down if we want to discuss it. We are in Linyi, there are people of the Rufeng Sect everywhere, so be wary of eavesdroppers.”

It was hard to say whether there really were eavesdroppers, but “three men make a tiger”; rumors can become truths with enough talk, and this news was gradually swelling, like cotton wool soaked in water. Even though no one had actually witnessed the affair with their own eyes, the contents of the rumor were nonetheless more and more plentiful, growing spicier the more it spread...

Until finally, even the non-cultivating commoners in the small villages outside of Linyi had heard, and the fields circulated with the talk.

“Goudan-ge^[12], lemme tell you a secret, don’t tell anyone okay?”

“What secret? Acting all serious, tell me, you know how well I keep my mouth shut, it won’t ever get out.”

“Listen well then, there’s an earth-shattering scandal at the Rufeng Sect. That Song Qiutong, you know her right, the woman who’s about to marry Nangong Si, she’s such a tramp. Goudan-ge, did you know? She’s gotten chummy with Ye Wangxi behind her own fiance’s back!”

“How’s that possible??”

“Well why not? Didn’t you know that back when Song Qiutong was being auctioned at Xuanyuan Pavilion, it was Ye Wangxi who grew lecherous at her beauty and bought her for dual-cultivation purposes?”

Li Goudan was quite shocked, his mouth hung wide open until he finally stammered out, “My, my heavens...Such a thing...”

This villager Li Goudan’s worldview was completely turned upside down, and at night in bed when he was cuddling his wife chatting, he marveled, “Chunhua, you’re still the best after all.”

The villager Zhao Chunhua blinked. “What’s wrong? Saying that so suddenly?”

“See, even though you’re a little ugly and a little short, you’re hardworking and can bear many children. Not like some women, cheating on their husbands and going against the values of womanhood.”

Zhao Chunhun was somewhat irritated. “How am I ugly? Just because my face is a little sallow?” Then she got curious. “Who’s wife is being promiscuous? How come I didn’t know?”

“It’s not anyone from the village, it’s those bunch of lord cultivators who fly around on swords all day.”

Zhao Chunhua was astonished. “Who is it?”

“The one who’s about to marry at the grand wedding,” Li Goudan said.

Zhao Chunhua subconsciously did not consider in Nangong Si’s direction and blanked for a good while before it abruptly dawned on her. She jolted off the bed. “My heavens, *what*?! There’s such a thing? You’re not just talking nonsense, are you?”

“Why would I talk nonsense?” Li Goudan puffed out his chest to make his wife believe him more. He said with great conviction, “A friend saw with his own eyes how Ye Wangxi of Rufeng Sect is having an affair with Song Qitong! Those two have already slept together behind Nangong Si’s back!”

Heartlessness in romance had always been one of the fastest news to travel; whether it be the poor or the rich, cultivators or not, everyone loved to use it as a topic of conversation. In the blink of an eye, the guests gathered at the Rufeng Sect all more or less learned about this scandal. By the time it reached Chu Wanning’s ears, the content of the story had already been lavishly embellished, and even the year, month, day of Ye Wangxi and Song Qitong’s date was described in detail. They even went so far as to say Song Qitong was marrying Nangong Si now because she was already carrying Ye Wangxi’s child, and the fickle lover that was Ye Wangxi refused to recognize the mother and child at the cost of his own career.

“Just you all wait and see who that child looks like after it’s born, Nangong Si or Ye Wangxi!”

Chu Wanning knew Nangong Si’s character but he was unfamiliar with Ye Wangxi and Song Qitong, so he couldn’t be sure whether the rumor was true or not. He felt rage, but while someone with his personality might be an expert at differentiating right from wrong, when it came to the transient affairs of romantic relationships, he was completely at a loss of what to do.

One day, Nangong Si came to pay a visit and Chu Wanning gave him a subtle talking to, but Nangong Si didn’t seem to understand the implied meaning at all, and continued to happily tell Chu-zongshi all about the fun stories of his pet faewolf Nao Baijin.

“I was breeding him the other day and it went fairly smoothly. That female faewolf should be giving birth next month. I wonder how many wolf pups she’ll give birth to,” Nangong Si said while smiling. “If some are born handsome, I’ll have my father send one to Sisheng Peak.”

When Chu Wanning heard this he felt it was a good chance and said, “Mn, but I worry the wolf pup’s blood won’t be pure.”

“Why wouldn’t it be? Nao Baijin and that female faewolf are both cultivated from snow wolves, they’re plenty pure.”

“You’re that certain that female faewolf was never bred with other demon wolves before?”

Nangong Si blinked. "That's impossible, that female faewolf was raised by the Bitan Estate and there's only one of her in the entire kennel, she couldn't have bred even if she wanted to, our Nao Baijin was all she had!"

Chu Wanning felt his hint was already incredibly obvious and very clear. He compared people to wolves to hint at all those rumors, so why couldn't Nangong Si understand?

Chu Wanning pondered and thought perhaps he wasn't precise enough. After some contemplation, he added, "While she was the only faewolf at the Bitan Estate, she still had to stay at the Rufeng Sect for a while when you brought her over to breed with Nao Baijin, correct? You have so many faewolves, might she have..."

"She won't, she won't!" Nangong Si started to laugh brightly, "So that's what Zongshi is worried about? That female faewolf and Nao Baijin are kept in the same cage, there's no chance for any other faewolves."

"....."

On your dumb head be it!!!

Nangong Si didn't notice Chu Wanning's gloom in the slightest, and he rose to his feet in invitation. "Zongshi, the construction of the Xiaoyue Track Field wasn't complete when you first left, and now it's been expanded twice already. Let me bring you over for a visit and take a ride on Nao Baijin?"

"No," Chu Wanning rejected.

Nangong Si was visibly disappointed. "Why not?"

"I don't know how to ride anything else but horses," Chu Wanning replied. "You're about to be a married man, settle down some, don't be raising wolf pups all day or waste time at the track fields. Go spend time with Miss Song, if you're able. People and animals are the same, if you don't spend time with her, you'll grow distant from one another."

"That won't happen, Song Qiyong treats me perfectly well, and she's very obedient too."

"....."

"Then, Zongshi, if you think I'm neglecting her, I'll just call her over to join us. I'm always telling her about you, so she must want to meet you as well."

At those words, Chu Wanning thought that since he didn't know Song Qiyong well, he wasn't sure how much truth the rumors contained, so it wouldn't be a bad thing to get to know the junior married couple-to-be better before Nangong Si's wedding.

Thus, he nodded and rose to his feet. "Very well. Then go find her, and I will wait for you at the Xiaoyue Track Field."

While Nangong Si was leaving, he ran into Mo Ran, who was just returning, at the courtyard door, and the two bowed in greeting at the spirit screen. As Mo Ran entered the courtyard, he spotted Chu Wanning standing beneath the osmanthus tree. Before him was a small stove of red clay spouting with strings of steam, and upon the stone table were two cups of half-finished eight treasure tea.

"Shizun, Nangong Si came to see you?"

"Mn, he wants me to go to the Xiaoyue Track Field to take a look at the faewolf he raised," Chu Wanning said as he turned around to head back inside. "This attire is inconvenient for riding, I will go change."

Faewolves were ferocious creatures, and although Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning was capable, he was still too worried to let the man go on his own. "I'll go with Shizun."

Chu Wanning stopped in his step at this and gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you know how to ride wolves?"

Mo Ran smiled, his black eyes bright. "Why wouldn't I? My horse riding skills are superb, so theoretically, nevermind wolves, I know how to ride anything."

Chu Wanning was just about to tease him when he suddenly felt "Good at riding anything" connotated some sort of wet, ambiguous affair. The scenes that had appeared in his dreams flashed before his eyes involuntarily, and his mind wandered to the positions the two of them had taken within the dream, of the sweat pooled at Mo Ran's firm abdomen, and how he had lain powerlessly on the divan for the other man to ride as he pleased, almost as if he had become a plaything under Mo Ran's body as the man drove on.

Boom, Chu Wanning flushed bright red.

He scolded under his breath, "Shameless!"

Who knew if he was scolding Mo Ran or himself, but he turned and slammed the door shut behind him, leaving the half-rolled curtain still swaying, like the drawn out, quivering heart of the one who had fled to hide inside the house.

Xiaoyue Track Field was a vast pasture. The world was frozen now, the grass and trees windswept, with a thin layer of frost covering the field where green met yellow. The winter day hung inoffensively over the sky, though because of the dark overcast lighting, it appeared meagrely cold, and the sun's rays that spilled down were even more perfunctory in their work, showing no signs of life. Nonetheless, at the end of the horizon stood the dense, private hunting woods of the Rufeng Sect: evergreens luxuriant with bushes of pine needles, glowing a field of golden from the distance like the fluffy and soft baby feathers of fledgelings.

Nangong Si was standing by the wooden fence in the middle of conversation with Song Qitong when he suddenly noticed two men approaching, emerging from the thin fog. It was Chu Wanning and Mo Ran, and he was slightly taken aback at first before he chuckled. "Mo-zongshi, have you come along too because you don't trust leaving your shizun with me?"

"No," Mo Ran chuckled as well. "I came in case shizun runs into anything upsetting and lashes out at Young Master Nangong because he has no one else to yell at. What a grievance that'd be for Young Master Nangong, so I'm here specifically as a punching bag."

"....." Chu Wanning sent him a narrow glare and said frigidly, "I think you're here to set things on fire."

"Pft." Song Qitong who was standing behind Nangong Si giggled softly when she heard the exchange. Lifting her curtain of eyelashes as soft as baby feathers, she gracefully stepped out from behind her fiancé, delicate and lovely in bearing, beautiful in coiffe and face.

She gazed at Mo Ran and Chu Wanning as she gently chuckled. "I have long heard talk of the deep master-disciple bond between Chu-zongshi and Mo-zongshi, and from what I see today, it appears to be true."

Our 2ha translation has moved to an Advanced Chapters system.

Info on how to apply for access [HERE](#)

The main docs will continue to be updated at 1ch/mth and accessible while the adv chapters folder will be going at a much faster rate of 1-2ch/week.

This decision is made not just to encourage readers to legally support Meatbun for the commercial work she has done, we also hope to foster a group that respects the original author as well as our work.

There seems to be the belief that once our work is released to the public domain that it no longer belongs to us, that anyone is freely entitled to it. The amount of toxicity we received and the number of eager snipers ready to run away with our work is inexcusable. The creation of the advanced group is not an attack on anyone without means and the 21+ age restriction is not about what is deemed age-appropriate for the novel. This is about creating a space of mature readers who appreciate the value we bring, and our fight against the aforementioned entitlement. Rynn and I are only here for a good time for ourselves, and we want to keep it that way. No one is forced to join this group.

At this time, all updates will be on Twitter only. The age restriction is non-negotiable.

If you have questions NOT already covered in the instructions doc, my DM on Twitter is open.

Suika

[1] [丹霞山 Danxia Mountain](#)

[2] Dual cultivation = cultivating by having sex

[3] 春光 springtime (hornytime); 青涩 underripe (*like a virgin, touched for the very first time*)

[4] [Taishi chair](#) is an elegant furnishing choice that also reflects on the high social status of the owner

[5] He refers to himself as 区区, an overtly and excessively belittling way to address oneself, i.e “an insignificant nobody”

[6] From The Analects of Confucius, “One bowl of rice, one scoop of water, in a humble alley; others would not have been able to endure such a hard life, but Hui is happy all the same. Praise be to Hui!” (Hui is one of Confucius’ disciples) which extols the virtues of living a simple life and being content with it.

[7] [Partition wall](#): a wall inside the courtyard, facing the gate, kind of like a privacy screen

[8] 小叶子 Xiao Ye-zi: Ye Wangxi’s Ye means leaf; the pet name literally means “little leaflet”

[9] 鸟人 lit. “bird person” is a general insult, doesn’t really have the same scatterbrained/crazy implications but english doesn’t have many bird based insults

[10] Yifu=foster father

[11] [Moon gate](#)

[12] Dog Balls bro